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Film Quarterly

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Laura Mulvey

A Clumsy Sublime

NOTHING DIVIDES THE HISTORY of the cinema into pre- and post-digital so clearly as the world of special effects and nowhere is this division clearer than in the disappearance of rear or back projection (using what are called "transparencies" or "plates"). Watching Hollywood films made after the coming of sound, rear projection seems in hindsight like an aesthetic emblem of the bygone studio era. As so often happens with passing time, its disappearance has given this once-despised technology new interest and poignancy.

Rear projection represented an attempt to reconcile the conflicting demands of star performances and action sequences: the stars' close ups and dialogue could not necessarily be recorded during scenes involving dramatic action (or even driving a car). So landscape or cityscape footage, often filmed by a second unit or extracted from the studio library, would be projected in a specialized studio onto a screen; then as the stars played their scene (with as little extra movement as possible), screen and studio would be filmed together. In Preminger's *River of No Return* (1954), for example, Marilyn Monroe, Robert Mitchum, and Tommy Rettig struggle to keep afloat on a raft, at one moment on location, at the next in a studio tank with the river and its landscape flowing behind them in rear projection. These shifts inevitably emphasize the incompatibility between foreground and background, and therefore the artificiality and glaring implausibility of the rear-projection sequences.

In his beautiful article, "The Wandering Gaze: Hitchcock's Use of Transparencies," Dominique Paini says: "Transparencies are all about time." In rear-projection sequences, the different levels of film time are both visible and confused. Essentially a film is made up of three time levels: the time of viewing, the time of registration, and the time of fiction that emerges from the edited construction of a narrative. However, the relation between the registration time and the fiction time is uncertain. I have recently argued that in the process of pausing and restarting a film, so concentrating on a shot rather than an edited sequence, the time of the fiction may fall away, transforming an image into a document of the moment at which the celluloid was exposed. This temporal duality, of course, has to be constructed in the mind of the spectator, and the return of dialogue and editing will easily reassert the time of the fiction.

Rear projection introduces a different kind of dual temporality: two diverse registration times are "montaged" into a single image. While this is true of any photographic superimposition, the dramatic contrast between the "document"-like nature of the projected images and the artificiality of the studio scene heightens the sense of temporal dislocation. Although, in principle, the studio element should seem to encapsulate fiction as opposed to the documentary cityscape or landscape, the studio shots often have the reverse effect. As the stars have to stay on an exact, given spot, their space is constricted and—often facing artificial wind, water, or vertiginous height—they make the required gestures as though in a mime. Performances, even in the easier setting of a car or a train, tend to become self-conscious, vulnerable, transparent. The actors can seem almost immobilized, as if they are in a *tableau vivant*, paradoxically at the very moment in the film when there is a fictional high point of speed, mobility, or dramatic incident.

When *Marnie* came out in 1963, critics condemned its "processed" shots, most particularly one of Tippi Hedren's Marnie seen exultantly riding her horse for the first time. The intensity of movement is reduced to static studio gesturing. As the star appears in this strange, disorienting space, her emotion trumps her parody of movement. In fact, Marnie herself loses all sense of time and place just when the discordance of time and place characteristic of rear projection is most evident. This paradoxical, impossible space, detached from either an approximation to reality or the verisimilitude of fiction, allows the audience to see the dream space of the cinema. But rear projection renders the dream uncertain: the image of a cinematic sublime depends on a mechanism that is fascinating because of, not in spite of, its clumsy visibility.

LAURA MULVEY is the author of *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (Reaktion, 2006).

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Left to right: Yohana Cobo, Lola Dueñas, Pedro Almodóvar, Penélope Cruz, Blanco Portillo

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Volver

Director, screenplay: Pedro Almodóvar. Producer: Esther García. Director of photography: José Luis Alcaine. Editor: José Salcedo. Music: Alberto Iglesias. © 2006 El Deseo D.A., S.L.U. U.S. distribution: Sony Pictures Classics.

LOOKING BACKWARD

Almodóvar's *Volver* takes him back to his own roots in La Mancha; to the somber tone of *The Flower of My Secret* (1995), where he first followed his characters back to their home village; and to the theme of sexual abuse that was central in *Bad Education* (2004). After two films with male protagonists (*Talk to Her* [2002] and *Bad Education*), *Volver* also returns to Almodóvar's focus on women and maternity ("the origin of life and of fiction") in his signature genre of woman's melodrama. Perhaps most dramatically, *Volver* marks the return of the extraordinary actress Carmen Maura, after seventeen years of estrangement (allegedly because instead of escorting his leading lady to an awards ceremony where she received a major prize, he took a young man he had just met instead).

In earlier Almodóvar films, Maura's vital performances and resilient sexuality had been associated with major advances in his career. In his debut feature *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (1980), a sex farce on female bonding, she was a rape victim who became the empowered leader of the pack; in his first film to win recognition from international critics, *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (1984), a neo-realist black comedy, she played a downtrodden housewife who murders her wayward husband and gets away with the crime; in *Law of Desire* (1986), the first film produced by his fraternal production company El Deseo, she was the transsexual sibling seduced and abandoned by her father and priest yet who still survived and thrived; and in his breakthrough blockbuster, *Woman on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1987), she was dumped by her philandering lover at the opening but forged a new community of women by the end. Despite the marvelous performances of other actresses in subsequent films, Maura's aura continued to haunt his canon, mak-

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The windmills' revolving blades evoke Cervantine myths of La Mancha

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ing us wonder—what if *she* had played the diva in *High Heels* (1991), or the writer in *The Flower of My Secret* instead of Marisa Paredes, or the nurse in *All About My Mother* (1999) instead of Celia Roth. By playing a maternal ghost who comes back to life in *Volver*, she may signal a new phase in Almodóvar's career. For, despite its humor, what is new in *Volver*—and so brilliantly embodied by Maura—is the transfer of her legendary resilience from the comic sphere of sexuality to a more somber "culture of death." As Almodóvar puts it: "It's a film about the culture of death in my native La Mancha . . . The way in which the dead continue to be present in their lives, the richness and humanity of their rites mean that the dead never die."[1]

This return from the dead also applies to Almodóvar's distinctive mode of reception: his increasing reliance on what I call "retro-seriality," a strategic form of intertextuality that encourages us to read each new film in the light of his previous works, preventing them from becoming closed texts and keeping his entire body of fictions open and alive. That becomes his way of participating in this Manchegan culture of death.

THE RETURN TO LA MANCHA

Volver opens with a panoramic shot of elderly widows in a village cemetery, sweeping their husbands' tombstones and their own that await them, as if domesticating death. Like the later funeral procession for Aunt Paula (Chus Lampreave), the camera moves from right to left, as if returning from an earlier journey. As the central characters repeatedly drive back and forth between their home village and Madrid, the camera sweeps across the stark landscape, lingering on the turbine windmills whose "revolving" blades harness the power of the wind as they evoke earlier Cervantine myths of La Mancha and Almodóvarian tales of Madrid.

At the village cemetery we encounter three generations of women who must grapple with melodramatic deaths. The first generation is represented by Irene (Carmen Maura), whose image and name we glimpse on a tombstone and who supposedly lies in the grave with her husband, victims of a tragic fire. But later we will learn that she murdered her husband and his lover, whose ashes were mistaken for her own. The tombstone is now being polished by her two daughters, Raimunda (Penélope Cruz) and Sole (Lola Dueñas), who will soon have to deal with the death of Aunt Paula and the reemergence of their mother's ghost. The sisters are aided by Raimunda's teenage daughter Paula (Yohana Cobo), who will soon commit patricide when her father tries to molest her, a murder that will strengthen her bond with her mother. Not only will Raimunda dispose of the corpse and take full responsibility for the crime, but she will confess that this man was not Paula's biological father and that she was impregnated by her own father, whose tombstone they are now tending.

The film's casting is crucial and its connotations cumulative for at least three of the female roles. Carmen Maura's ghostly grandmother is most closely connected to her earlier role as the betrayed husband-killer Gloria in *What Have I Done*. Penélope Cruz's Raimunda evokes her earlier parts as young mothers with similarly problematic impregnations: the teenage whore in *Live Flesh* (1997) where the father of her child is unknown, and the nun in *All About My Mother* who is knocked up by an HIV-infected transvestite. Chus Lampreave's half-blind Aunt Paula is closely related to dotty characters she played in two earlier Almodóvar films: the grumpy granny in *What Have I Done* who, at the end of the film, returns to her home village with one of her grandsons; and the eccentric mother in *The Flower of My Secret*, who saves her daughter from killing herself over her broken marriage to an unfaithful husband. Accelerated by the wind and her family's melodramatic deeds in *Volver*, Lampreave's dottiness slides into dementia, but her relations with her female relatives are restored; Carmen Maura is no longer the estranged daughter-in-law

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Carmen Maura in *Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Girls on the Heap* (top) and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*

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Sole is confronted by the impassive glares of men, but comforted by the women who encircle her

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Agustina's black garb and Falconetti haircut contrast with Raimunda's vibrant colors and low-cut necklines

who resents her (as in *What Have I Done*), but the loving sister who cares for her until the end.

Except for Raimunda's husband Paco (Antonio de la Torre), few men appear in *Volver*. The only female rivalry over a man happens in the back-story. Wayward husbands and incestuous fathers are (or have been) quickly dispatched off screen. In the bedroom scene, after Raimunda rejects Paco's drunken sexual advances, he lies beside her masturbating. Intercutting between facial close ups of each, the camera finally settles on her expression of exhausted annoyance while he is reduced to off-screen sounds of heavy breathing. Earlier Paco had directed his sexual urges toward their daughter, staring at her crotch and spying on her as she undressed for bed. We don't actually see the sexual attack or murder—only his bloody corpse and the kitchen knife. Although none of the women in this movie "had any luck with men," they are not really man-haters. Raimunda buries Paco near the river he loved, and mother and daughter hope he rests in peace.

The other males are minor roles or extras—a few old men in Aunt Paula's funeral procession ("Women here live longer than men!") and men from the film crew who patronize the restaurant Raimunda takes over. The largest assemblage of men appears at Aunt Paula's funeral, when Sole flees from the house of the dead and is stopped in her tracks by their impassive glares. Then in an overhead shot, she is encircled by village women who comfort her with loving kisses. Such overhead shots are repeatedly associated with women's communal bonding. Two extras have brief speaking parts: the stranger inquiring about renting the restaurant; and the clerk in the hardware store (played by producer Agustín Almodóvar) who sells Raimunda what she needs to dispose of Paco's corpse. The only other male speaking roles belong to characters connected to the restaurant who are both sexually attracted to Raimunda: the friendly owner Emilio (Carlos Blanco) who used to be her boss, and the nameless production assistant (Leandro Rivera) from the film crew who hires her as a caterer. She shows no romantic interest in either. Her attention is focused solely on other women who help her cope with death.

Volver is as exclusively devoted to women as *Bad Education* was to men. Though both films deal with the legacy of sexual abuse, here the resolution is curative rather than corrosive—a turn Almodóvar associates with female resilience. Yet this curative resolution comes at the expense of sexuality, which was central to his previous films. Though his earlier films celebrated sexual mobility as a progressive force for social change, this celebration began to be questioned in *Bad Education* but still remained a strong force. But here in *Volver*, Eros is replaced by death and maternity, a combination that also drove the narratives of *All About My Mother* and *Talk to Her*, but not with the somber tone of the sex-purged *Volver*.[2]

This somber tone is most strongly embodied in the childless Agustina (Blanca Portillo), a village neighbor who belongs to the second generation like Raimunda but is more deeply embedded within the culture of death. After hosting Aunt Paula's funeral, she discovers

she is herself terminally ill. Her only wish before dying is to discover whether her own missing mother is dead—information that can be gained only from Irene, whom she believes to be dead. Agustina's close-cropped Falconetti haircut identifies her as a victim of cancer and symbolically a martyr; she dresses in the drab greys and blacks of the village instead of the bright reds, blues, and lilacs of the sisters' clothes, hardware, and surrounds in Madrid.

Although Raimunda's desirability is explicitly mentioned (her friend, the local and rather homely whore Regina [Ma. Isabel Díaz] tells her, "With your cleavage and my mojitos, we'll make a fortune!" and her mother is surprised by how buxom she appears), the film does not acknowledge female erotic desire. Nor is there any suggestion of homoerotic attraction between the women, except for the loud smacking kisses they give each other and one comic moment when Regina thinks Raimunda is hiring her for sex ("I didn't know you liked pussy!"). This alliance between neighborhood prostitute and working-class housewife with a murdered husband echoes an earlier pairing in *What Have I Done*. But this time the whore-next-door is no sexy blond Verónica Forqué, who gladly distracts the detective from the murder, but a hefty hooker whom Raimunda recruits to help bury her husband. An illegal foreign worker, Regina considers sex merely as another form of physical labor.

Instead of indulging in sexual pleasure, the women redirect their energies toward domestic physical tasks, which segue into transgressions. We see them shopping, cooking, and eating in scenes that provide some of the film's strongest visuals—overhead shots of steaming soup, fresh flan, diced red peppers, and juicy red tomatoes, selected for Raimunda's catered meals in the "borrowed" restaurant. We watch them shampooing each other's hair at Sole's "illegal" beauty shop. We witness three women teaming up to move a refrigerator and then to heave the heavy ice chest that contains Paco's frozen corpse. And, from the opening in the cemetery, we observe them cleaning up every mess they encounter, which prepares us for the exquisite shot of Raimunda sopping up Paco's bright red blood with lacy white paper towels. This strangely comforting image is reminiscent of the hospital cleansing rituals that are performed so lovingly on the lifeless body of the comatose dancer in *Talk to Her*. These images reassure us that domestic order can be restored even after murder, rape, and incest.

By focusing on female bonding across different classes, nationalities, and generations—connections based on blood, friendship, proximity, identification,

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Domestic labors

and obligation—the film makes the temporary rifts between mother and daughter and between sisters seem all the more painful. Appropriately, at Cannes the film won awards for best actress (which went to its female ensemble cast) and for best screenplay. Yet, despite the brilliance of its ensemble performances and script, the purgation of sexuality still makes *Volver* lack the emotional power of Almodóvar's greatest films—*Law of Desire, Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down* (1989), *High Heels, The Flower of My Secret, All About My Mother,* and *Talk to Her*. It's not that every great film must necessarily be driven by erotic desire but rather what has made Almodóvar's comic melodramas unique is their extraordinary ability to harness the full force of a dangerous sexuality and, despite its devastating consequences, to transform it into a redemptive form of love. That's why Almodóvar's unique brand of comedy is even more generous and forgiving than Renoir's, for not only does everyone have their own good reasons but also their own redemptive *amour fou*. Nowhere is *Volver*'s diminishment in emotional power more apparent than when it is read through *High Heels*, a film with which it shares a common source.

ECHOES OF *HIGH HEELS* (*TACONES LEJANOS*) AND ITALIAN MELODRAMA

When I interviewed Almodóvar in 1987 and asked him why the patricidal impulse in Spanish Oedipal narratives is so frequently displaced onto the mother, he described a script he was then working on that contained matricide. Titled "Tacones lejanos" (literally "distant heels"), the story was about two sisters from the south

of Spain who run away to Madrid because their Bernarda Alba-type mother prophesies they will destroy the world. Once they flee their village, their parents perish in a fire. Whenever either of them has sex, their mother's ghost appears, which drives the sisters crazy. Finally they have a duel with their mother's ghost and, after killing her, discover she was really alive and only pretending to be a ghost.

Four years later at a screening of *Tacones lejanos* at the Directors Guild in Los Angeles, when I asked Almodóvar how an outrageous story of matricide had been converted into an equally outrageous melodrama about motherlove, he claimed he had only "borrowed" the title from that other project, which was never made.[3] Clearly, *Volver* could be seen as another version of that earlier story,[4] for it follows the original more closely: by having two orphaned sisters (instead of an only daughter) who flee to Madrid and whose parents supposedly perished in a fire, by having their mother return as a frightening ghost, and by having her pretending to be dead. Like *High Heels*, the film replaces matricide with motherlove and compensates for this omission with a patricide and the murder of two unfaithful husbands. But whereas in *High Heels* those murders are motivated by an intense motherlove, which turns into a redemptive *amour fou*, in *Volver* the murders are motivated strictly by the crimes of the father. In both films, the mother is not in fact a repressive Bernarda Alba; she returns not to prevent her daughters from having sex but to compensate for her own earlier neglect. In *High Heels*, this impulse leads the dying mother to make a false confession of her daughter's crime, a loving act, which, in *Volver*, is displaced onto the next generation.

Both films contain a public confession that takes place on television, a medium hated by Almodóvar (and Raimunda). The confession was the germinal idea for *High Heels* and one of the "emotional high-points" of the melodrama: a TV newswoman married to the owner of the network, uses her live broadcast to confess that she murdered her husband, her mother's former lover. The parallel scene in *Volver* is abortive and not central to the story. After failing to persuade Raimunda to sing on her sister Brigida's talk show, Agustina appears herself, intending to confess that their mother was having an illicit affair with Raimunda's father. At the last moment she refuses to betray her friends and family and walks off the set—forfeiting the prize (cancer treatments in Houston) that may have forestalled her death.

Both talk-show sequences strengthen the acoustic dimension of the mother–daughter bonding, which is underscored even more strongly through song. The mother in *High Heels* is a pop star–diva, whose singing first estranges her from her daughter but ultimately becomes the primary means of their heart-wrenching reconciliation. In *Volver*, at the wrap-up party for the film crew, Raimunda, in a rare moment of happiness, spontaneously sings "Volver," the song her mother taught her for a stage audition when she was a child. With lyrics commenting on the action, the song inspires hope not only in her mother (who is hiding outside) but also in her daughter who has never heard her sing. Instead of expressing a sexually subversive motherlove, the song strengthens a safer form of transgenerational female bonding. Besides contributing to the romantic excesses of *melo*-drama, these songs resonate with the feminist theorization of sound and of the importance of the maternal voice in subject formation.[5] Yet only in *High Heels* does the mother's voice become an acoustic fetish like the sound of her "distant heels" from the original story. *Volver* converts those sounds back into visuals—fetishized close ups of Raimunda's shoes seen by her mother hiding under the bed. Raimunda doesn't rely on sounds to detect her mother's presence; instead she uses her nose to sniff out her mother's farts—a comic ability more related to her skills in the kitchen than her talents in the bedroom.

As in *High Heels*, *Volver*'s implicit Hollywood intertext is *Mildred Pierce* (1945)—not only because of Raimunda's willingness to take responsibility for her daughter's crime but also for her own success in the food business. Yet as in *Bad Education*, the primary on-screen intertext comes from Europe. In *Volver* Irene watches on TV a brief excerpt from Luchino Visconti's comic melodrama *Bellisima* (1951), one of the films screened in Madrid during that historic Italian film week in 1951 that helped launch the modern Spanish cinema. Those Italian films inspired Spain's distinctive brand of absurdist neo-realism, which was revived by Almodóvar in *What Have I Done*. Starring the magnificent Anna Magnani (whose face is seen in the excerpt), *Bellisima* tells the story of a downtrodden stage mother who prostitutes herself to make her young daughter a star. This allusion gives greater resonance to Raimunda's story about auditioning as a child singer, and it extends the female bonding across national borders to include those great stars from post-war Italy. Not only does Almodóvar dress Cruz to resemble the young Sophia Loren, but he makes her bonding with her daughter evoke Loren's Oscar-winning performance in *Two Women* (1960). The allusion to *Bellisima* pays particular tribute to Maura by strengthening her iden-

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Both *High Heels* (top) and *Volver* end with reconciliation between mother and daughter

tification with Magnani—as two extraordinary actresses who move so fluidly between light comedy and wrenching emotional pain.

Despite the many similarities shared by *Volver* and *High Heels*, the differences between the two films are profound. While *High Heels* is saturated with an edgy sexuality that makes motherlove explicitly homoerotic, *Volver* is dedicated to a tamer form of female bonding that helps domesticate death. Although *High Heels* thoroughly violates the repressive goals of the Bernarda Alba figure from Almodóvar's original story, it ends with the death of the sexually promiscuous mother. Conversely, although *Volver* fulfills those repressive goals by purging sexuality from the movie, it celebrates the lush sensuality of Penélope Cruz, who is more gorgeous here than in any of her Hollywood roles or previous performances for Almodóvar. Raimunda may not express sexual desire, yet the vitality of Cruz's stunning performance keeps her resilient sexuality alive. As in *High Heels*, it is a sexuality rooted in motherlove and maternity and not dependent on men, yet it is restorative rather than subversive. The film ends with a final love scene between mother and daughter, whose reconciliation brings both of them fully back to life.

Maura's desire for forgiveness and reconciliation with her daughter acquires additional resonance by coinciding with her own real-life reconciliation with Almodóvar. At the end of the film, she returns to Agustina's house to nurture the next generation that is dying. She may not die herself, but she is ready to rest in peace. It is more difficult to determine whether this reconciliation with Maura (both in reality and fiction) or the film's sacrifice of sexuality is primarily responsible for arousing a similar serenity in Almodóvar. "The most important thing that comes back in *Volver* is the ghost of a mother, who appears to her daughters," he has said. "And this fiction, the one in my film (and here comes my confession) has produced a serenity in me such as I haven't felt for a long time (really, serenity is a word whose meaning is a mystery to me). I have never in my life been a serene person (and it's never mattered to me in the slightest). My innate restlessness, along with a galloping dissatisfaction, has generally acted as a stimulus."

Perhaps Almodóvar has sacrificed his "restless" edge and "galloping" desire to gain a new mature serenity (as he did with *The Flower of My Secret*), a turn that will be fully appreciated only with hindsight. Yet, at this point, I still experience this sacrifice of sexuality, and this turn from Eros to Thanatos, as quite a loss.

NOTES

I want to thank Rosalie Newell, whose perceptive observations I incorporated into this essay.

1. Pedro Almodóvar, "Confession," in the *Volver* Press Notes (Sony Pictures Classics, 2006). Other Almodóvar quotes in this essay come from this source.
2. In *Reading for the Plot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Peter Brooks argues that all narratives are driven by death.
3. "High Heels," *Film Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (spring 1992): 39–49.
4. A similar dynamic occurred with *Law of Desire* and *Bad Education*, which Almodóvar claims are two versions of an earlier story that still remains undone.
5. See Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), and Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

MARSHA KINDER, author of *Blood Cinema* (University of California Press, 1993) and *Refiguring Spain* (Duke University Press, 1997) and Professor of Critical Studies in the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California, has been a member of *Film Quarterly*'s editorial board since 1977.

ABSTRACT *Volver* transforms a comic female resilience into a curative "culture of death." Despite brilliant performances, the loss of sexuality makes *Volver* lack the emotional power of Almodóvar's greatest films. In contrast to *High Heels*, which shares the same source but makes motherlove homoerotic, *Volver* focuses on a tamer female bonding.

KEYWORDS casting, female bonding, Maura's return, retro-seriality, sexual purgation

The Line of Beauty

Director: Saul Dibb. Producer: Kate Lewis. Teleplay: Andrew Davies (from the novel by Alan Hollinghurst). Cinematography: David Odd. Editor: Tania Reddin. Music: Martin Phipps. © 2006 BBC Television. U.S. distribution: BBC Warner (DVD).

"They've really taken you in, haven't they?" Mrs. Guest (Jessica Turner) asks her son Nick (Dan Stevens). She refers to the Feddens, a wealthy London family with whom Nick has taken up residence in 1983 at the start of *The Line of Beauty*, as something between lodger, house guest, and family friend. "Yes, I suppose they have," Nick replies. The play on words catches the crux with excruciating elegance. Is Nick the dupe of this family and culture? What does he want from them? The father, Gerald (Tim McInnerny), is a Tory junior minister, so Nick's entrée to their house is in a way his implication in the politics of the day; the mother, Rachel (Alice Krige), is possessed of independent wealth and to Nick seems to be an exemplar of gracious living; and he has an unspoken, unrequited crush on the son of the house, Toby (Oliver Coleman), sturdy and straight, his friend from student days in Oxford. His key relationship—even more in the serial than the book—is with Catherine (Hayley Atwell), the clever, manic, and in every way *un*conservative daughter, the person who makes sure the story ends in tabloid revelation and political scandal. Alan Hollinghurst's novel and now its three-part BBC TV adaptation don't exactly look back in anger, but they return to the 1980s in a disillusioned and at times disgusted spirit. It was the worst of times, even if it seemed to Nick to be the best of times—that seems to be the position, despite the side of costume drama that encourages fondly nostalgic recall.

The adaptation is within its means remarkably faithful, extremely resourceful, tactful in compressing the 500-page book into three TV hours, and consistently lively, as you would expect from the screenwriter Andrew Davies, who has become the regular first choice for literary adaptations on British television. This project is in a way closer to his home territory than, say, the armfuls of nineteenth-century novels on his extensive CV, most recently *Bleak House* (2005), most famously *Pride and Prejudice* (1995). The image of Colin Firth as a freshly bathed Mr. Darcy in wet dress shirt became —partly with the help of Bridget Jones—a kind of icon of heritage sexiness, and the clincher that Davies could make costume drama eye-catchingly raunchy. He added an upbeat queer credential with his 2002 adaptation of Sarah Waters's Victorian-period lesbian romp *Tipping the Velvet* (maybe *too* upbeat to suit Hollinghurst's often doleful sense of sexual compulsion). Moreover, Davies's own best work as an original screenwriter was probably *House of Cards* (1990), a pungent satire on ambition and betrayal in the higher echelons of the 1980s Tory world—a world which also supplies much of the setting of *The Line of Beauty*. The main previous credit of the director, Saul Dibb, is *Bullet Boy* (2004), a story of teenage gangs set in east London, and it is a sign of his versatility as a director that he brings a sharp observation and sense of nuance to such different milieus.

The book is partly a seduction by place, like *Brideshead Revisited* or *Howards End*, the romantically conceived home of a certain ideal of affluent culture. Each of the three TV episodes starts and ends in this place. The Feddens' house in its tree-lined West London square is an even more luxurious picture of London wealth than *Notting Hill* (1999), though less fantastical than that film, since the Feddens are actually meant to be very rich, whereas the characters in *Notting Hill* were gifted with real estate well beyond their means in the interests of elegant local color. It is greeted with a "Wow" by Nick in the serial's first word (compare the more measured launch of the novel: "Peter Crowther's

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A seduction by place

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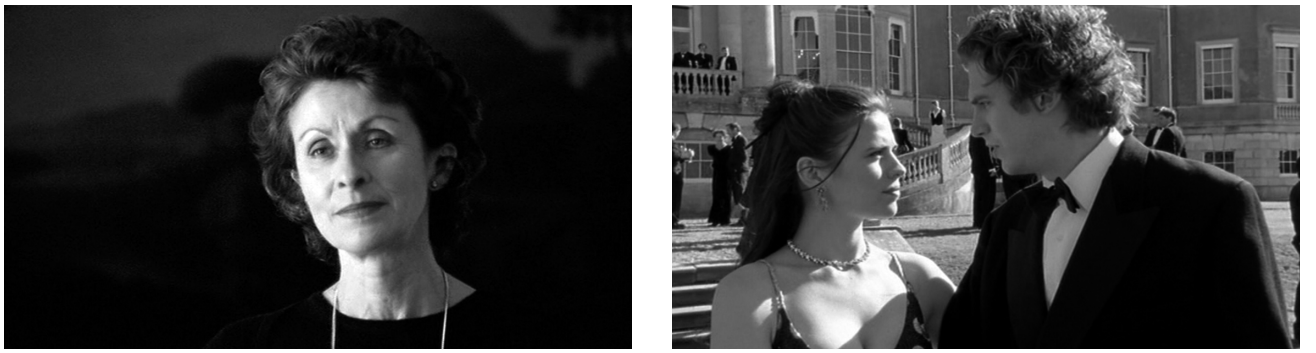

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Elena (left), Nick and Catherine

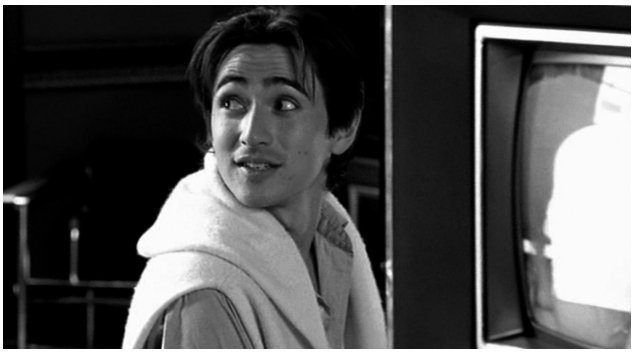
book on the election was already in the shops"). The viewer, however, is not required to join with Nick in being wowed. The direction attends more to his response than to sumptuous framings of the house and furniture: we are not in a Merchant–Ivory setting here, indeed the danger is probably the opposite one that we can't enough share Nick's delight in the choice architectures to feel for his sense of them.

The house has its keeper, Elena (Carmen de Sautoy). Characterized in the book by a "look of unhappy subjection that no one but Nick ever noticed" (122),[1] she is instead in the TV version steely and aristocratic from the start, with a threatening hint that she is the Mrs. Danvers in this beguiling Manderley. Naive Nick at first mistakes her for Mrs. Fedden and burbles ingratiatingly about the excellence of the Guardi in the drawing room. In Hollinghurst he persists "in face of the woman's smiling deference and heavily accented murmurings" (23), but there is none of this courtesy in the serial: she lets him run embarrassingly on. When in a later scene he thanks her at dinner, she gives him a subtle look suggesting that actually he's not high-class enough to be thanking her. Like her, but in the end more dispensably, he is effectively part of the senior household staff.

The mistaken identity incident returns at the end of the last episode, with Elena recalling it and delivering a kind of *coup de grâce*; she saw from the first, she said, that Nick was "*sciocco* . . . no good." In the serial this scene has been moved backwards, so that it comes *after* the climactic showdown in the book, in which a furious Gerald turns violently on Nick and orders him out of the house (Gerald's financial and sexual dodgy dealings have at this point come out in the papers). He looks really shocked by her summary rebuff, the last of his rejections chez Fedden. Her jump from his social faux pas to the larger condemnation is wildly unfair, yet it cruelly picks up in its grain of truth, and in the way it makes sense to Elena, on Nick's insecurity and his compromised life. Elena here becomes the ultimate guardian of the house, decisively closing ranks against the scapegoat intruder: her verdict is as it were ratified by a shot in the very last scene, in which we see Nick's departure from the point of view of Gerald and Rachel, standing at their upstairs window, the married couple reclaiming their domestic space, recuperating.

But there's a possibility that he's well out of it, and this maybe is why the serial endows Elena with that touch of the Gothic (a darkly dressed figure filmed in shadowing corridors). We might feel that the shock of the ending is a blessing in disguise, traumatic but necessary if Nick is to escape into a wider and less sleazy world. The end of the TV series keeps a well-judged silence about his expulsion into the London panorama of the final shot. It may be a new life, but he might be too damaged to live it, and there are dark symbolic hints that he has contracted HIV. The absence of a flashback structure (in book or film) keeps the possibilities open about the future ushered in by this loss. The last, visually distinctive shot is an aerial view of London's westbound roadways towards nightfall, not exactly a landscape either of loss or of hope, except that it gathers Nick into a rather somber sketch of solidarity with other lives in the metropolis. The book ends quite differently, with Nick holding on through all his losses to his sense of "beauty" (its final word).

Three out of Hollinghurst's four novels end with fairly horrible comeuppances for their protagonists, worse than they deserve, the reader tends to feel, but also somehow grimly condign. *The Line of Beauty* (2004) resembles *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) in dealing a spectacularly punitive shock to its main character, who is wealthier, brasher, and more of a hedonist in the earlier book, but similarly possessed of a snooty cultural style and a sexual taste for black men (which runs up against English racism as well as English homo-



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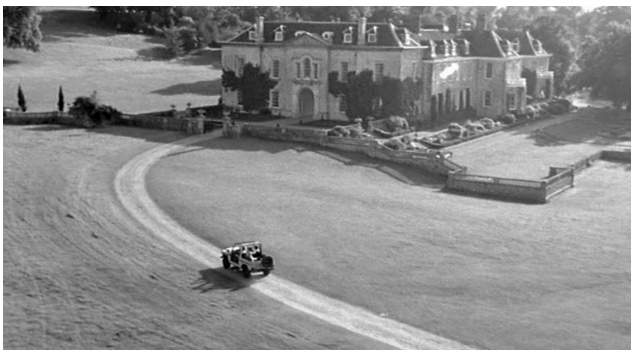
Nick's lovers: Leo (left) and Wani

phobia). The endings shock the heroes and maybe the readers too into a realization that in the 1980s there was a war going on in the politics of homosexuality, with the governing classes as the villains. But the idea that the 1980s were rife with greed, selfishness, and bigotry is in 2007 a familiar and comfortable piece of cultural memory, so that the indictments of *The Line of Beauty* may not have quite the charge they need dramatically (although American viewers, armed with different preconceptions, may find them more powerful). The currency of English wealthy idylls—and of the English Establishment more generally—is more tarnished than it was in the days of the TV *Brideshead* of 1981. When we see big houses now, we want to know where the money came from; when we see affairs of state, the first impulse is to look for evidence of spin.

It is a problem in the serial and perhaps the book that we don't enough discern why Nick is so captivated by the Feddens' world, no matter how fine the homes and gardens. Why is he so drawn to them? This remains rather mysterious. He's not a gold-digger, it seems, and not much moved by ambition. The TV series relies a lot here on the subtlety and intelligence of Dan Stevens's performance as Nick, but the story on screen has him as a mainly passive figure, observing and reacting. In the book he is (in Henry James's term) the central consciousness, and his wit and liveliness are the medium of the whole story: if his motivations remain obscure, still we have much more to go on. In particular, his love of art and culture is a warmer thing in the book, whereas on screen it tends to dwindle into snobbery and connoisseurship. Perhaps in response to this obscurity about the appeal the Feddens exert over him, Andrew Davies has made the family more likeable. Rachel, especially, played by Alice Krige, becomes much more warmly attached to Nick (she is also I think implausibly younger than John Standing, who plays her on-screen brother, Lord Kessler). In the serial she no longer pronounces judgment "in one of her sudden hard formulations" on the Tory minister who was caught cottaging: "it's was vulgar and unsafe" (25), she says, a conclusively dismissing phrase which resonates through the book, and gets a darker twist in the HIV context of safe and unsafe sexual practices. Davies wants the family to be more attractively fleshed out and writes in, for instance, a good lively kitchen scene in which we are first introduced to them and they to Nick. He emphasizes, a little blatantly at times, the surrogate family idea: "I suppose I sort of fell in love with the whole family," Nick tells Catherine in a scene added for



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Far-flung locations: the Feddens' *manoir* (left) and Leo's family home in Stoke Newington

the adaptation. Still, it stops well short of showing them as ideal compensating family. Any decent therapist would want to know more about why Catherine cuts her arms, for instance. The adaptation gives Nick a cogent extra line in the row with Gerald, where he accuses the family of "leaving Catherine in the hands of a virtual stranger."

The main thing that's only latent in the story is the clash between Nick's social tastes and his sexual ones. Like Will in *The Swimming-Pool Library*, he is especially drawn to black men, and ones much less educated than himself. His sexual desires are structured across class and background in ways that are likely to lead to large sociopolitical conflicts. *The Line of Beauty* minimizes these. Of Nick's two lovers, the first, Leo (Don Gilet), ends his affair with Nick at the end of the first section of the book (and episode of the serial), and is only very briefly tested socially by meetings with Nick's Tory milieu; and the second, Wani (Alex Wyndham), whose wealthy business-class family comes from Lebanon, is part of an international Oxonian upper class. In terms of its racial dynamics, *The Line of Beauty* is set in the same period as *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), in which there was a real danger and a liberating comic frisson to the unlikely brew of Thatcherite business and a mixed-race gay love affair. But it was written and has now been filmed in the time of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (book 2000, TV serial 2002), in which the multiculturalism of contemporary London is much more of a political given and a comical opportunity. The scene where Nick visits Leo's family stands somewhere between the two: the mother (Floella Benjamin) is strict and evangelical, grimly so for Leo and his lesbian sister (Nikki Amuka-Bird), but comes across on screen as comical and old-fashioned. It's a sign of changed times that a West Indian character can be seen with this irony, as the bearer of repressive bygone codes, even in an uncompromisingly anti-racist story.

Although it has been hailed as a chronicle of the 1980s, *The Line of Beauty* seldom goes far from its coterie setting (any more than its TV and book precursor *Brideshead Revisited* did, except in its prologue): the scene with Leo's mother in far-flung Stoke Newington is an exception. Compare the panorama of urban energies and social change in *The Swimming-Pool Library* and *The Spell* (1999) and it is apparent that Hollinghurst is working on a different canvas here (a wider one in terms of gender, but narrower in class). In *The Swimming-Pool Library*, for instance, the male fragrance of choice was Trouble for Men, combining sexy allure ("You're trouble") with a promise of real troubles ahead (disease and persecution); here in *The Line of Beauty* it's Je Promets, looking to issues of trust in more intimate contexts. The real subject is the tension between two kinds of conservative culture, high and low, which joined forces, up to a point, in the 1980s: a traditional one, landed, affluent, Oxbridge-educated, and a newer, Thatcherite one, less tactful and humane, more impatient and violent for change. The latter gets less space in the story—the world we see isn't much shaken up. The two characters who most represent life outside traditional conservatism are Jasper (Joseph Morgan), an estate agent, and Russell (Justin Salinger), a photographer for *The Face*. Both are at different points boyfriends of Catherine's boyfriends, and they are among the flimsiest characters in the story, neither of them rising much above their status as signs of the times. Andrew Davies has added a scene in which Nick visits Catherine in Russell's council flat in Brixton, rather heavy-handedly shown as terra incognita to Nick, and the flat is melodramatically sordid and festooned with arty erotica. Though the scene is clumsy, it does recognize how little the story gets out and about into the streets of London, how little of the color and trashiness and crazy mixture of a changing London it represents.

The best scenes of the book translate into excellent set pieces on TV, notably the party where a coke-fueled Nick dances with Mrs. Thatcher.

Instead we are in a world familiar from a previous history of screen costume drama including versions of Forster, Woolf, and Wharton, fantasies of an opulent past, often organized round a conflict between love and conformity. The titles at the beginning, in flowing cursive script, tell us that the setting is as much Georgian as Thatcherite. So too does the elegiac theme music, which even at times accompanies the sex scenes and adds its notes of foreboding hindsight. (The scenes of gay sex are filmed in a lively and positive spirit which may still be radical in mainstream TV drama: mostly they are al fresco, and they seem to be more comfortable, hygienic and reciprocally satisfying than you might think likely, but then screen sex has never been a realist mode.) Gerald is a squirearchical Tory, in the eighteenth-century manner, with plenty of energy and effrontery. His brother-in-law Lord Kessler is a descendant of the new Jewish aristocracy of Victorian England as depicted in the novels of Trollope ("he's very good on money," Lord Kessler tells Nick, in a deliciously

subtle scene on both page and screen). These period dramas (none more so than the Merchant–Ivory ones) tend to buy into a Whig version of history: the audience can easily see through the stuffy past with its strict codes, crying out for the kind of liberating reform that the attractive young leads are striving for. The past is another country; they did things stupidly there because they were all repressed.

Is *The Line of Beauty* queer or gay? It comes from the time when "queer" was coming into being as a combative and dissident idea of sexual politics. But among its TV precedents *Queer as Folk* (1999) was much queerer, and among literary ones so was Hollinghurst's first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, also set in 1983. In *The Line of Beauty* Nick aspires to find a place for accepted gayness in the conservative world he's so drawn to. He wants to find a place on the boat, not to rock it. The story shocks him out of this hope, most violently through the full-on homophobia he meets in the governing caste, who turn on him not for his failures of candor and courage which the book Jamesianly ponders, but for the mere and scandalous fact of his being gay. The Feddens' homophobia comes out under pressure and two of the crucial powerbrokers in the book are the most murderously anti-gay, the asset-stripping Sir Maurice Tipper (Kenneth Cranham), "a cold-blooded thug" (447), and the Tory MP Barry Groom (Christopher Fairbank)—like the Tory Home Secretary Norman Tebbit he is known as "a bit of a Rottweiler," the talismanic dog of the decade. Nobody sympathizes with Nick because his two lovers both get AIDS: instead he is thought contaminated, and in an ominous scene at the end Nick expects that his own HIV test will this time prove positive.

The early moments of the AIDS panic, with press and government colluding in homophobic hatred, come over strongly on screen and page, especially in the restaurant scene where waiters and diners convey their wish that the stricken Wani should just disappear. "Silence = Death" was an activist watchword of the 1980s, but Nick is given to silences and is no kind of activist, for all that he has a political awareness and an essential decency. The advent of AIDS, like the outbreaks of racism, cuts through the moral ambivalences of the story, and turns it unequivocally angry and political.

The really queer figure in the story is the heterosexual Catherine, who like Nick has a drug habit and unsuitable boyfriends. But unlike Nick she is scandalously outspoken, and (in ways the serial underlines) she really hates and assaults the conservative culture prevailing around her. But she's mentally disturbed, her childlike clarity also a deficiency of balance. Drama tends to like figures who blow the gaff, and her candor is a delight amid the secrets and half-secrets of the Feddens' family life and political contacts; but she is also a self-harming manic depressive, and her full-on attack on her father comes when she is unbalanced by lithium, so that the story gives you a really oppositional politics only in the context of mental illness.

Alan Hollinghurst wrote in *The Guardian* (13 May 2006), "The film of *The Line of Beauty* has a very good-looking cast, more so than the book, but no one will object to that," which just about stops short of objecting but murmurs a bit. "I have a feeling for, say, Nick's size (about 5ft 6)," he went on, "and I know that he has curly blond hair and blue eyes, but I've no idea what his nose or is hands are like." The book is explicit about Nick's not being tall and at times makes that fact expressive of his social disadvantage. Stevens is six foot tall and has wavy dark hair and classical good looks which the many trailers on British TV made the most of: but thereby he became the embodiment of beauty, not the moth drawn to its flame. Although Dan Stevens is exceptionally good, I can't get past the feeling that he's miscast, mainly because his looks so much suggest the glam-

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Nick dancing with Mrs. Thatcher, and Gerald in his consitiuency

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Implication and menace

orous center of attention and not the aspirant courtier on the dispensable edge of things. He seems also culturally to be securely part of the Fedden world, every inch the mannerly public schoolboy, for all that the serial adds a line about his going to the local comprehensive school.

When I first saw the serial, I admired it in many ways but found it disappointing. The adaptation problem is that you sometimes think it has been done very well, but what in the end was the point? Its very fidelity to the book made it seem like an optional market-driven extra (like another new Andrew Davies adaptation, of *Brideshead Revisited*, recently announced for 2008). But of course readers of the book, and especially keen fans, are only a small part of the target audience. Seeing it a second time, I was more impressed by its nuance, throughout, and by the intensity in the final episode. The casting is excellent (with the important proviso about Nick), the acting unusually subtle and rich. The best scenes of the book translate into excellent set pieces on TV, notably the party where a coke-fueled Nick dances with Mrs. Thatcher. Where I had thought, for instance, that there would be no screen equivalent to the telling moment when Nick, looking back at a photo of himself dancing with Mrs. Thatcher, sees "a look of caution he hadn't been aware of at the time" (407) in fact there is, through the shooting of the dance sequence to indicate his point of view and to suggest hers as not quite the same. As in John Mortimer's screenplay of *Brideshead Revisited* and Ismail Merchant's of *A Room with a View* (1985), Andrew Davies has had the astuteness and confidence to follow Hollinghurst's brilliant dialogue very closely. He has whittled it down, but seldom adds to it—one notable exception being a virtuoso short scene in which Gerald enlists Nick's collusion in covering up the affair he is having with his secretary:

GERALD: Appreciate your tact.

NICK: Well, Rachel . . .

GERALD: Well, absolutely. Good man.

Only nine words, but a wealth of implication.

As a fervent admirer of the book and only a lukewarm one of the TV series, I suppose I have to end with my reservations. A major problem is that in spite of the high quality of the cast there are very few characters here you really want to spend time with—in contrast, say, with *Brideshead Revisited*. This matters much more on screen than on the page because of the obvious and crucial difference in the medium: the characters are here the object of our attention instead of Hollinghurst's prose, in which every sentence is a nuanced pleasure. Nick is the central consciousness of the book, and the central figure in the drama; but in the rather passive figure we see on screen there is no equivalent to the nervous energy and lively witty discriminations of the prose which is his literary medium.

NOTE

1. Parenthetical references are to Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004

PETER SWAAB is Senior Lecturer in English at University College London and editor, with Philip Horne, of *Thorold Dickinson: A World of Film* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming in 2007).

ABSTRACT The BBC TV adaptation of Alan Hollinghurst's Booker Prize-winning 2004 novel of Aids and Thatcherism was undertaken by Andrew Davies, best known for his version of *Pride and Prejudice*. Directed by Saul Dibb, *The Line of Beauty*'s depiction of 1980s London is appropriate to both to its source and costume-drama conventions.

KEYWORDS Alan Hollinghurst, Andrew Davies, adaptation, gay literature, Aids

Passio

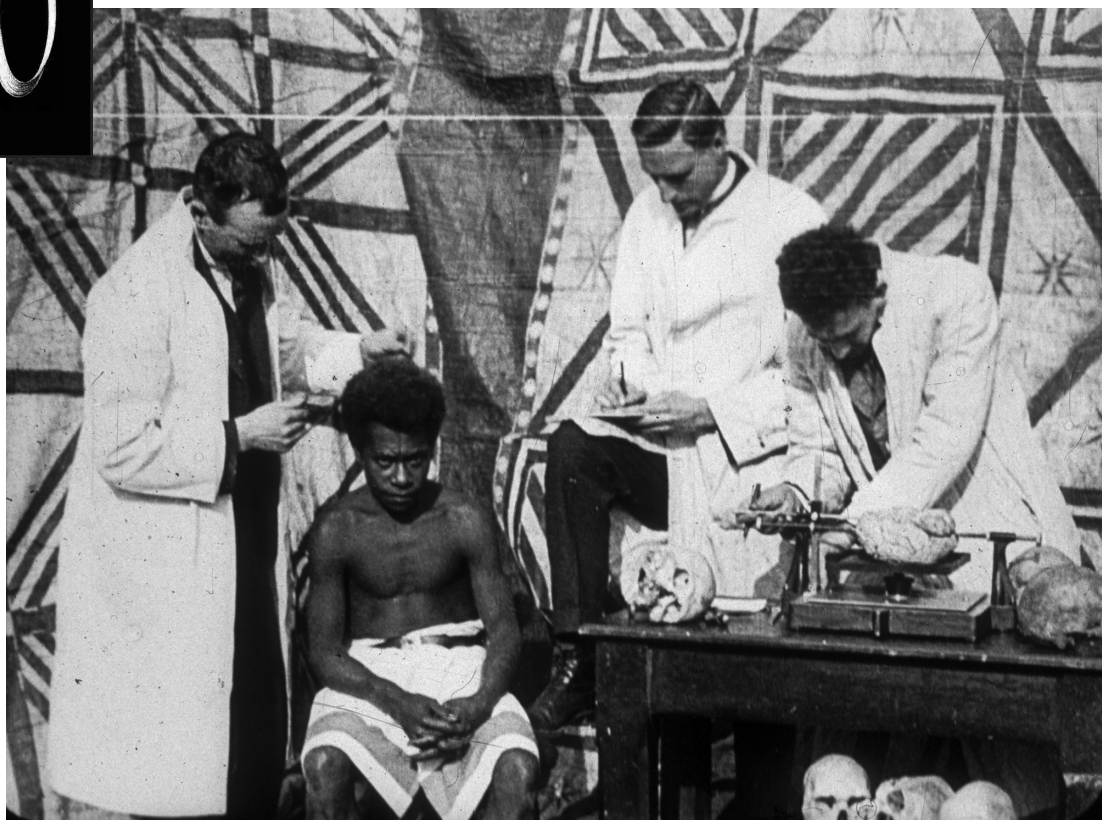
Director, writer: Paolo Cherchi Usai. Producers: Peter Limburg, Livio Jacob. Editor: Raquel Satumalaij. Music: Arvo Pärt. Calligraphy and handcoloring: Brody Neuenschwander. © 2006 Paolo Cherchi Usai.

I attended a special screening of scholar, archivist, and curator Paolo Cherchi Usai's *Passio* on 3 September 2006 at the Telluride Film Festival. This was the only screening in advance of its full Australian premiere on 23 February 2007 at the Adelaide Film Festival. A sort of pre-premier with recorded music rather than the required live performance of Arvo Pärt's 1982 "Passio," it was nevertheless, as silent film festival hounds like to say, a revelation. But it was not the kind of revelation I had expected. No precious lament of the decay of the medium, this seventy-four-minute film is the hardest-hitting, cruelest, and most affecting collection of sound and image this side of Buñuel. And it contains not one image of nitrate decay.

The first image we see is of a dead body, probably from a film of a concentration camp but, like every other archival image in this film, it does not fit into familiar paradigms. A skeletal, naked corpse of a man lies face up on the ground, arms and legs splayed out—the whole cadaver fills the screen. At the center of the image is the darkness that is the cadaver's genitals. The horror hits us squarely between the eyes as sustained organ notes from Pärt's stark, minimalist piece of music begins. Image and sound proclaim the suffering of the flesh as the film's sustained first theme. Where can we possibly go from here?

The cadaver image fades, the title "Passio" remains, initiating a new motif—a thread of written text (the calligrapher is Brody Neuenschwander, who collaborated with Peter Greenaway on *Prospero's Books* [1991] and *The Pillow Book* [1996]), scrolling left to right, that will appear intermittently throughout the film. The words, which are the full title of Pärt's music and the only (barely) legible words in the film apart from the title, read: "Domini Nostri Jesu Christi secundum Johannem." As the sound dies out, pure darkness and silence follow. This, then, is where such a film can go: into spells of darkness, silence, and text abstracted into

The opening title (left); white scientists measure a "native"



Isabella Rossellini presents a Peter Limburg / Livio Jacob Production, *Passio*

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Enigmas of phenomenal life: a hairy leaf, a reptile and an inscrutable shadow

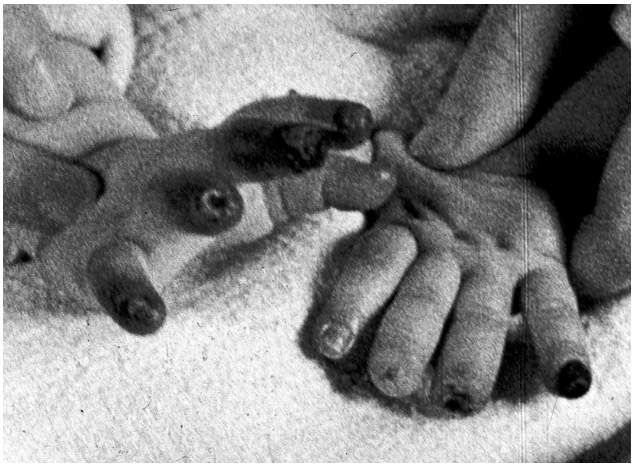
pure visual design that at intervals runs vertically, from bottom to top of the frame, ornamenting the periodic spells of darkness. If we could turn our head to the side and read Latin we might think we could follow the text. But the words go by too fast and are stylized to the point of illegibility. They punctuate the darkness and the silence with bright bursts of light—providing necessary respite in a film that might otherwise be too difficult to watch.

Calligraphy, Pärt's music and its Latin singing, darkness, light, black-and-white or handcolored film footage—these are the elements of *Passio.* But the text is not meant to be easily deciphered and the music does not *accompany* the images. Rather it seems to call them forth. Nor do these images tell a story in any conventional way. Cherchi Usai's minimalist "press book" describes the images as having "been chosen from the countless manifestations of our neglected or repressed collective memory, ranging from documents of political and racial oppression to scientific experiments, depictions of human suffering turned into mass spectacle and [to an archivist the greatest crime of all] the deliberate destruction of moving images."

The art of *Passio* lies primarily in the choice and spacing of these richly various images. Many of them are like the opening shot of the cadaver: a horrific image of the suffering body in an unmistakable pose of crucifixion. Human suffering as spectacle for the impassive eye of the camera does prove to be a major theme. But, additionally, many images simply speak to the enigma of phenomenal life: the hairy texture of a leaf, the wiggling random movements of organisms under a microscope, a burst of handcolored red light in a night sky as two men walk toward the camera, a reptile and an inscrutable shadow, a woman who sits in a parlor reading a book as a nearly naked man wearing a penis sheath enters the room. There is no overarching thematic beyond what Jean-Louis Comolli has called the "frenzy of the visible" produced by myriad "machines of the visible": microscopes, telescopes, cameras which bring the phenomenal world closer and closer. The moving images viewed by these machines might be clear or scratched, black and white, tinted or in color; they might be microscopic or macroscopic, but they all invite our fascinated or horrified stare.

This machinic stare at the "frenzy of the visible" is often augmented by a gesture, notably a redundant pointing. The second shot after the cadaver is of a finger indicating the hieroglyphs of the Rosetta stone. A white finger points to a mystery of the past, the mystery of the scientifically isolatable "other." Typically, white male experts point while women or people of color writhe, convulse, or just hold still to be examined or measured. In one sequence a black man's skull is measured by three white-coated scientists. Human fingers or metal implements isolate the part of the image at which we are invited to stare. A pointer traces the outline of a scar on a human torso, on the areola of a woman's breast, and the little penis of what looks like a skinned dog. In another, more theatrical kind of pointing a Méliès-like magician enthusiastically dismembers a woman and points proudly to his work. One long sequence shows a turn-of-century medical professional manipulating the limbs of a supine and naked epileptic man, the better for the camera to view his agonizing and seemingly endless convulsions. Another shows two bearded Victorian doctors induce the hysterical convulsions of a clothed woman. Manipulation, measurement, pointing, cutting open—these are the irreducible gestures of a medium caught up in a medico-scientific relation to the human and animal body.

The only touch that is not part of this medico-scientific manipulation and measuring occurs when a man and woman kiss. Later this image is viewed on a strip of film that is scraped and spliced. Film is handled, pointed to, and cut in ways analogous to an autopsy,



© 2006 Paolo Cherchi Usai

Fingers point at fingers and film is displayed

open heart surgery, and an excruciating eye operation in which something is scraped out of a cornea and the incision is sutured. Film becomes body, body becomes film. A black spool of film is pulled from a can and displayed in much the same way as vulnerable organs are displayed; emulsion is scraped from the image of the kiss so it can be spliced by the same kind of knife that cuts the eye. A meditation on cinematic embodiment that often seems to treat film stock more lovingly than the human body, *Passio* is Comolli's "frenzy of the visible" rendered self-reflexive.

If the film's first image is of death, its last is of birth. But it is not the familiar birth from *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Nor does this baby emerge from the womb as an obvious figure of hope and renewal as one might expect against the background of the "good news" of the gospel which inspires Pärt's music. Rather, the action runs in reverse: the baby is tucked back into the womb following the familiar numbers of the cinematic reverse countdown. This baby seems to know what the film has revealed: this is not a world into which one would want to be born. In between these bookends of death and life, destruction and creation, cruel manipulation and simple wonder, a rhythm of images pulses: beautiful, mysterious, horrible, and true.

Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958) overwhelms us with accumulated montages of fictional and real filmed catastrophe, Godfrey Reggio's "Quatsi" films (1982, 1988, 2002) bludgeon us with apocalyptic portents, Peter Delpeut's *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991) infuses us with nostalgia for the lost past, and Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) connects its images of impending doom and nitrate decay to psychedelic abstractions. Cherchi Usai's *Passio* joins the tradition of these earlier works most of which were created out of pre-existing footage. But it also differs from them. Its celebration–accusation of the "machines of the visible" goes deeper, its connection to its music is more profound, with Pärt's stark and simple oratorio prompting the images rather than underscoring them. Nor is this a statement constructed out of an arbitrary grouping of images just found in some attic. These are images treasured and cared for by a knowing archivist who "plays" them like the notes of Pärt's oratorio. We are neither bludgeoned by sensory overload, nor offered an easy nostalgia. Though we are compelled to give the film our rapt attention, this attention pays off; it has breathing space built into it. We are given time to assimilate what we have seen and to anticipate (or dread) what may come next. Darkness, silence, and the beautiful abstract lines of the stark white calligraphy provide time for both reflection and affection.

Cherchi Usai has set a high bar for the exhibition of his film. Unless other venues beyond Adelaide can provide not only baritone and tenor soloists, but also a quartet of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass together with a choir of 12–15 other singers, plus the organist, violinist, oboist, cellist, bassoonist, and conductor required by Pärt's score, and unless they can provide 35mm projectors equipped with silent-sized aperture, the film may not be shown elsewhere. Cherchi Usai insists that hereafter the film be screened with live orchestral music. Like every other silent film, only more so, music gives it a special liveness. *Passio* is a work of convulsive beauty. It richly deserves more than one day in the sun.

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ABSTRACT A rare, sometimes horrific 74-minute assemblage of archival footage, Paolo Cherchi Usai's *Passio* encompasses themes of human suffering, wonder, and cruelty. The film captures the "frenzy of the visible" of life from the microscopic to the macroscopic as called for by the stark, minimalist music of Arvo Pärt.

KEYWORDS Cherchi Usai, archival footage, live music, visual cruelty, Arvo Pärt

Introduction

FROM TIME TO TIME *Film Quarterly* has published special features on Hollywood films that have had a major influence on public opinion. In 1979 the film was *The Deer Hunter* ("a cultural event, late-seventies style," as editor Ernest Callenbach called it, *FQ* 32, no. 4: 10), in 1991 *Thelma & Louise* (a "breakaway hit" that "has entered the realm of public discourse," in editor Ann Martin's words, *FQ* 45, no. 2: 20). If any such recent film has merited similar treatment, it is surely Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). Like *The Deer Hunter* and *Thelma & Louise*, *Brokeback Mountain* won high-profile awards but, more than that, it became a mass-culture phenomenon—a talking-point or rallying-cry, a totem, milestone, and lightning conductor.

Also like *The Deer Hunter* and *Thelma & Louise*, *Brokeback Mountain* is politically charged. Neither a low-budget independent film like *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), nor a "social problem" picture like *Philadelphia* (1993), *Brokeback Mountain* brought a gay couple to the forefront of U.S. genre cinema. The film thus achieved a breakthrough, though one that had been anticipated by *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), *The Deep End* (2001), *Far from Heaven* (2002), and *Alexander* (2004). Is *Brokeback Mountain* therefore progressive? "Its release coincides with a precise and rapidly developing phase in gay history, the movement towards acceptance . . . 'for better or for worse,' one might say, but in any case it *has* to happen, there can be no turning back even if one wanted to" (28). Robin Wood's careful equivocation opens up questions that other contributors answer in different ways, setting *Brokeback Mountain* in a variety of cross-media and film-historical contexts.

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Troubled fascination in *The Deep End*

The film's politics are unavoidably connected with problems of media and cultural visibility that are summarized concisely by a scene in *The Deep End*, Scott McGehee and David Siegel's remake of *The Reckless Moment* (1949). Blackmailed after her gay son accidentally kills his lover, Margaret Hall (Tilda Swinton) receives a videotape of the couple making love. She watches the tape for some moments and, running the scene through several times, we may come to think that she lingers too long on these intimate images. But it is not easy to read her expression. It is perhaps some admixture of shock, fear, bewilderment, sadness, fascination, and suppressed rage. The complexity of the emotions that are not quite fully on display in Swinton's face suggests what, still, is at stake in mainstream representations of homosexuality—and notably *Brokeback Mountain*'s. The essays here review, refine, and substantially expand the debate about gay visibility in Hollywood filmmaking.

In terms of mode and genre, *Brokeback Mountain* is an intriguing hybrid: a tragic love story, a neo-Western, a family melodrama that ends on a mixed note of calamity *and* reconciliation. It is well attested how much this note resonated with audiences. Describing the impact of *The Deer Hunter*, Callenbach wrote that "the film has a strong effect on audiences: people cry." The same is true of *Brokeback Mountain*. This collection of responses to the film begins and ends with melancholy: with, in Jim Kitses's piece, a broad and fundamental sorrow which is (in a phrase of Thomas Wolfe's that he quotes) "stamped on the American face" (22); and with, in Joshua Clover and Christopher Nealon's contribution, a "genuine Western loneliness" (67) framed unexpectedly in a music video for Madonna. That such disparate but congruous reference points should emerge in relation to *Brokeback Mountain* is evidence of the value of giving it special close attention.

ROB WHITE

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Brokeback Mountain

Director: Ang Lee. Producers: Diana Ossana, James Schamus. Screenplay: Larry McMurtry, Diana Ossana (from the short story by Annie Proulx). Director of Photography: Rodrigo Prieto. Editors: Geraldine Peroni, Dylan Tichenor. Music: Gustavo Santaolalla. © 2005 Focus Features.

SYNOPSIS

Wyoming, 1963. The fiercely taciturn Ennis del Mar (Heath Ledger) and demonstrative Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) are hired by Joe Aguirre (Randy Quaid) to tend sheep on Brokeback Mountain. There, after a little while, they begin a sexual relationship initiated by Jack. Later Aguirre observes them through binoculars. Before the two men must leave the mountain, a flippant quarrel turns into a bloody fight. They go their separate ways.

Ennis marries Alma (Michelle Williams). Jack returns to Aguirre the next summer, looking for more work and for Ennis; Aguirre sends him away with some sarcastic remarks. Alma and Ennis, living in poverty, struggle to raise their young daughters; sometimes Ennis cannot contain his temper. At a rodeo in Texas, Jack meets Lureen Newsome (Anne Hathaway). They marry and the next year, Lureen gives birth to a son.

Jack contacts Ennis and visits him in Wyoming. They resume what will become a lifelong relationship (though an intermittent one), Ennis unaware that Alma has observed their embracing. They go back to Brokeback Mountain on a camping trip. In a subsequent conversation Ennis recalls his father taking him, as a child, to see the corpse of a murdered rancher who lived with another man.

By 1971, the marriage between Ennis and Alma is under pressure and in 1975 they divorce. He informs Jack by postcard. Jack immediately travels to Wyoming, mistakenly thinking the card was an invitation. He finds Ennis with his daughters and is sent away. Distraught, he travels to Mexico where he visits a male prostitute.

In 1978, Ennis tentatively begins a relationship with Cassie (Linda Cardellini). Jack meets a married man, Randall Malone (David Harbour), who seems to make a pass. In 1981, in what will be their last camping trip together, Ennis and Jack argue furiously when Ennis tells Jack he prefers to work rather than take another trip that summer. In 1982, Ennis's postcard to Jack is returned stamped "DECEASED." He phones Lureen, who informs him that Jack was killed in an automobile accident. Jack is seen, in a flash that may be Ennis's imagination at work, being beaten to death with a tire iron.

Shocked, Ennis travels to Jack's family home to visit his parents (Roberta Maxwell, Peter McRobbie). John Twist snidely tells him that, having long said he would one day settle down with Ennis, Jack had recently mentioned another man. Invited by Jack's mother, Ennis goes to Jack's bedroom. He finds in the closet, folded together, the old bloodied shirts they had each worn during that last fight on Brokeback Mountain. He takes the shirts when he leaves.

His daughter, Alma Jr. (Kate Mara), visits Ennis at his trailer and tells him she plans to be married. At first Ennis says he cannot attend the wedding because of work commitments. But he relents. After Alma Jr. has gone, Ennis yields to his grief at the loss of Jack.

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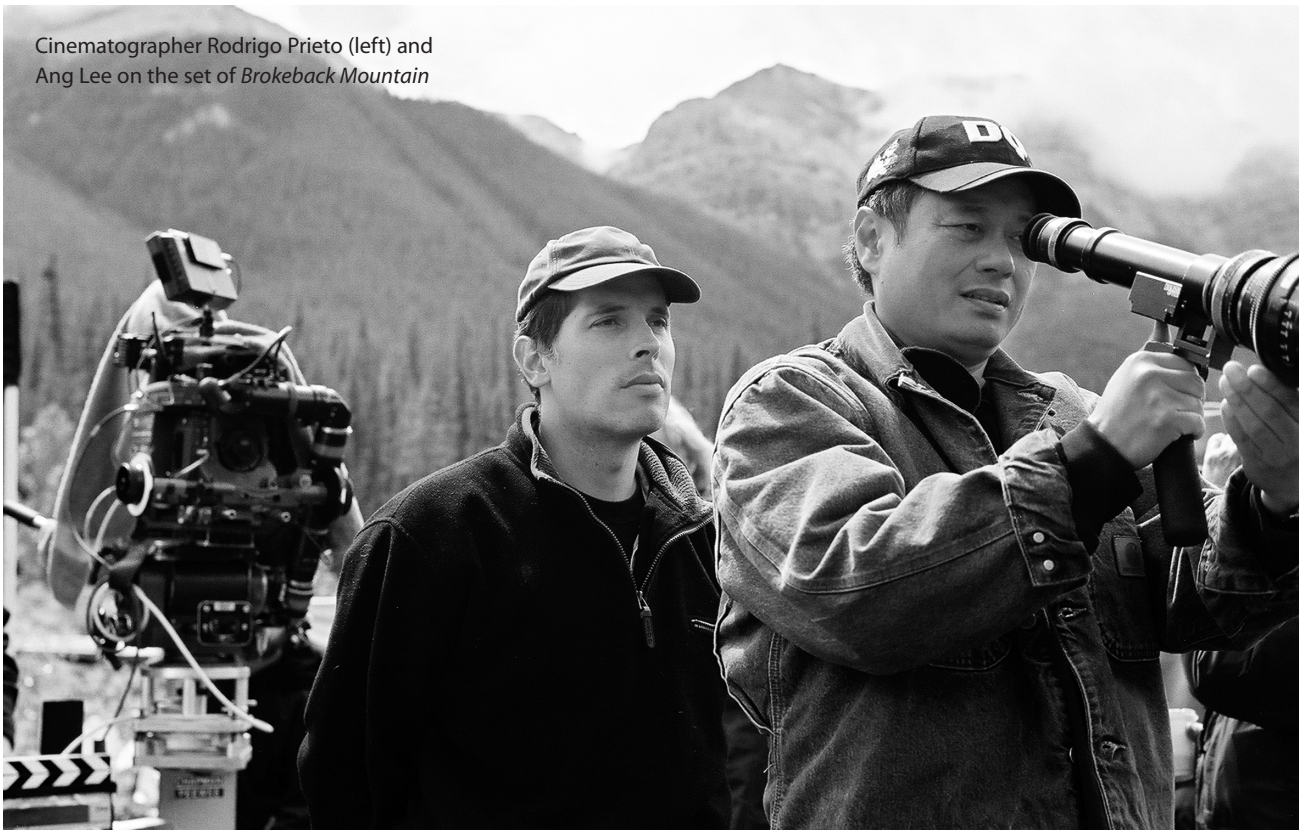
From top: Randall, Lureen, Jack's mother

■ JIM KITSES



Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto (left) and Ang Lee on the set of *Brokeback Mountain*

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All that Brokeback Allows

TWO COMMENTARIES, THE first from a nineteenth-century memoir subtitled *The Truthful Narrative of the Events in the Life of a California Girl on a Sheep Ranch*, the second from one of America's greatest twentieth-century writers, Thomas Wolfe, in their different ways both testify to the loneliness that, as Wolfe put it, "is stamped on the American face."[1]

> These men lived lonely lives . . . Often there was some mystery about those who took this work—a life with the sheep was far away from curious observation, and served very well for a living grave. Once I overheard talk of a herder who . . . had hanged himself. And no one knew what tragedy in his life lay behind the fatal despondency![2]

The mountains in the wintertime had a stern and demonic quality of savage joy that was, in its own way, as strangely, wildly haunting as all of the magic and the gold of April. In Spring, or in the time-enchanted spell and drowse of full, deep Summer, there was always something far and lonely, haunting with ecstasy and sorrow, desolation and the intolerable, numb exultancy of some huge impending happiness.[3]

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More often expressed through a stoic style and taciturn manner rather than openly addressed, isolation and solitude nevertheless have been a key subtext of the Western genre. And it is the sympathy and depth with which that motif is explored in *Brokeback Mountain* that produces much of its powerful impact. Like Wolfe's angels, Ang Lee's protagonists look homeward in vain.

Yet the relationship of the film with the Western genre is a confused and contested question. This is puzzling given the film's reliance on genre aesthetics and motifs to shape its lament for a broken America. A prime example is the key image employed in some of the film's advertising: Ennis del Mar stands looking down at two foul-mouthed louts he has cowed as Independence Day fireworks explode above him. Ennis's imposing stature and righteous demeanor bespeak a character absolutely certain of who he is and of his role and power. He is the Western hero incarnate, America's defender of family and community, a transcendental character of agency and action.

Compare a later, equally powerful and significant moment. "I wish I knew how to quit you": Jack Twist's anguished remark elicits Ennis's own tortured feelings—because of their history "I'm nothing . . . I'm nowhere." Against the vista of Brokeback's high country beyond, they grapple with each other, helpless victims of love and pain, rage and despair.

These images so crucial in mapping the film's trajectory testify to its sophisticated play with Western conventions. Like stereotypes, genre labels can offend by being reductive, yet nevertheless often point to an appropriate, even fundamental, relationship. Director Lee repeatedly rejected "gay Western" or "gay cowboy movie" as misleading and limiting descriptions. However, the labels had stuck well before he came on the scene in the seven years the Larry McMurtry–Diana Ossana screenplay circulated among studios and directors.

One can sympathize with Lee. As a popular genre the Western is very much past its glory days. Commercially once the bread-and-butter of the industry, the form is now seen as a pejorative category signifying "old-fashioned" to the mainstream audience. But in Lee and *Brokeback Mountain*'s case the change in emphasis suggested by the preferred labels of gay love story or romance is somewhat more complex.

Beyond the stigma of an unfashionably ancient genre, such efforts to market the film were also attempting to soften suggestions of a film with a radical gay agenda. In effect this campaign to orchestrate a more open reception of *Brokeback Mountain* amounted to an implicit depoliticizing of the film. Such efforts undoubtedly contributed to the pronounced tilt in some of the film's reviews seeing it as a tragic and universal study of tabooed passion and unrealized dreams.[4]

Yet Diana Ossana has acknowledged that she and writing partner Larry McMurtry were well aware that they were involved with a project that "subverts the myth of the American West and its iconic heroes."[5] The culture wars that dominate America and fuel much of its politics are in fact centered on gay issues such as same-sex marriage. No matter how high-culture its

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Ennis as American hero and broken man

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Images that recall the classical Western and melodrama

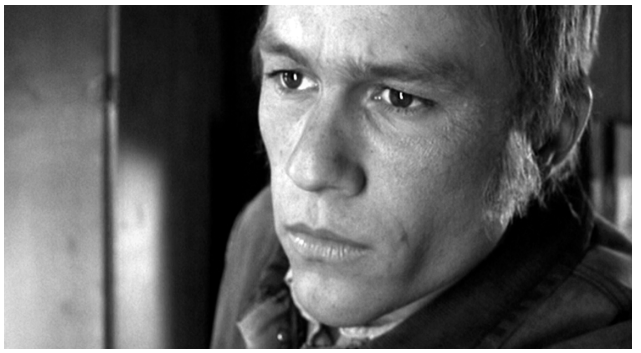
style and approach, a mainstream project like *Brokeback Mountain* at this stage in the nation's history inevitably has radical social implications. In fact, the film's subversive potential is all the greater for its lack of highlighting, dodging a conservative audience's defensive radar by the delicate humanizing of its characters and their hopeless situation. In any case, the extraordinary impact of the film as a mega-event is undeniable; *Brokeback Mountain* immediately achieved an iconic status as a code word and cultural reference point that dominated its historical moment. Ironically, the strongest proof of the political significance of the film is in the industry's calculated slight, the Academy preferring *Crash* for best picture and thus limiting the extent to which predictions of a "gay Oscars" would be realized.

"It has very little to do with the Western genre," Lee has said.[6] However, if the film avoids what the director terms "the fictionalized Western," nevertheless it is the genre's conventions that launch and drive *Brokeback Mountain*. Universal some of its themes may be, but this is not a film about lawyers or stockbrokers, not a study of a medieval or Victorian era. The cowboy is the American emblem par excellence, and Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist are nothing if not prototypical cowboys. Exemplars of pastoral purity and yeoman industry, they possess the knowledge and skills of the wilderness. They are authentic American heroes, self-reliant and brave, honorable and loyal. The circumstances of their relationship are such that we cannot judge them as flawed, cowardly, or duplicitous. Their passion's costs are counted in the dead and scattered sheep of their compromised mission and in their fatally damaged families. Yet if anything, paradoxically, such failures only serve to ennoble them in the innocence and depth of their love, and to dramatize the devastating scale of their—and everyone else's—sacrifice and victimization.

Recent Westerns have indulged a postmodern nostalgia for the cowboy way of life. Neo-Westerns set in the 1960s (as is *Brokeback Mountain*'s early action), both *The Hi-Lo Country* (1998) and *All the Pretty Horses* (2000) rhapsodize over the joys of the cattle drive and bronco busting. The neoclassical *Open Range* (2003) indulges a more conventional end-of-the West melancholy; after Robert Duval's consummate cowboy, "they broke the mold." But in *Brokeback Mountain* such yearning for the independent life of the cowboy is given a spin that is not so much romantic—or for that matter queer—as it is edgily realistic.

If the figures of Ennis and Jack draw on the Western's grand myth, they are also remarkably detailed both in terms of individual psychology, and social and economic setting. The context and nuance provided by Annie Proulx's short story make for the kind of backstory for cowboys typically glossed over in the genre. Young, uneducated, dirt poor, Ennis and Jack are roughnecks struggling to survive in a hardscrabble world. All cool and swagger on the surface, they are in fact lonely and needy, the products of broken families and absent fathers. Hiring them to herd sheep during the winter, Randy Quaid's sour supervisor addresses his new employees as "you pair of deuces."

Lee exploits the Western's conventions to definitively place his characters. The taciturn cowboy, a genre cliché, is reinvigorated in Heath Ledger's charged, contorted performance that externalizes his inability to address the emotional complexity of their situation. Although the more adventurous and articulate, the rodeo performer, Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack is no less at the mercy of "Brokeback." The opening scene of their non-meeting, the two cowboys pointedly avoiding each other as they wait for a job interview, immediately defines a world governed by macho drives and fears. Thereafter Quaid's abusive manner in hiring them gives further voice to these values. Formed by a competitive and violently homophobic society, Ennis and Jack's conviction that they "ain't queer" is understandable. Theirs is "a one-shot thing . . . nobody's business but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Cabined and confined, Ennis's sacrificial pain recalls that of Robert Stack's Kyle Hadley in *Written on the Wind* (1956)

ours." What drives the emotional attack of the film is the inadequacy of its characters to articulate and understand, let alone control, the experience that strikes them like a storm. American cowboys—of all people—have no business falling in love with each other. Practical and conservative types of a rough and ready manhood are by no means ready for man-love. It is precisely because their involvement is such an irrational and implausible event that it can elude easy categorization and is so persuasive and affecting. These are men of a particular time, region, and occupation far removed from a culture at ease with feelings and their verbal expression. The stone-faced Ledger in particular is a study in spastic, constipated pain, hunched over, gagging, swallowing his speech, a man who has been taught to hate feelings he has now discovered within himself.

The isolation of the wilderness and the utter loneliness of their lives both make possible the love that overwhelms these two men and also renders it intelligible, for us if not them. In open range, feelings, gender, and sexuality cannot be fenced in or legislated. What is sinful or perverted or deviant in the natural world, the world of the sublime?

But mountains are like the oceans, aggressively visible and yet mysterious in offering a variety of meanings—threat, challenge, spectacle, the eternal. Mountain literature has defined the extremes of ideology that have been influential in shaping understanding of such landscapes. "Mountain Gloom" is the term John Ruskin coined in his *Modern Painters* (1907) for the repulsion and fear that dominated representations of nature's most dramatic form until the nineteenth century. "Mountain Glory" was his balancing phrase to characterize the onset of positive views of mountains as embodiments of radiance and grandeur that coincided with the discovery of the sublime in nature.[7] Inevitably, we have read into nature whatever we have been taught or needed to see. Thus the Rockies—within which Wyoming's Brokeback would sit—were called the Shining Mountains by the Cree Indians who lived below them, and the Stonies by the first Americans who climbed them.[8]

Brokeback is obviously colored by these two extremes given the painfully ambivalent experience that it finally becomes for the men. A landscape (in Wolfe's words) of "savage joy," offering both ecstasy and torture, *Brokeback Mountain*'s mountain setting is crucial both as physical site and as the marker it becomes for the cowboys ("Old Brokeback got us good"). A signifier of their transformative experience and high hopes, the peak becomes the touchstone of their life and both a fond and finally haunting memory. Lee has said he was pleased at the abstract quality of the strange poetic title that Proulx had bestowed on her fictional peak. What is Brokeback-ness? A resonant allegorical reading implicit in terms of the Western's ideology and landscape is the notion of a damaged nation of tarnished ideals and betrayed promise. Such an idea is reinforced if one recalls that the Rockies have been proclaimed "the backbone of the continent."[9]

Quite apart from the aesthetics of the infinite, Brokeback's majesty and radiance can thus be said to have a national dimension. This is the American wilderness, the grandeur, beauty and isolation of the film's setting echoing the language John Ford had helped to shape with the buttes and mesas of Monument Valley. It is the world of the pioneer and the nomad, of adventure and adversity, the vessel that shaped American character. As foreign critics were quick to see in the early days of Hollywood, the Western's settings gave it a unique power to express in what became a coded aesthetics the ideological promise of America—freedom, openness, redemption, reinvention. Within this perspective it is possible to see the validity of the claim that *Brokeback Mountain* queers the Western, that setting a saga of same-sex love in the American wilderness both naturalizes and nationalizes it.

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Love, loss, memory

However, as Lee has argued, this is not the world of the traditional Western. If *Brokeback Mountain* recalls the frontier, the range is no longer open. The wilderness may appear pristine, but the mountain is the preserve of the Forest Service and its land is broken into allotments; Ennis and Jack are akin to government employees, like their hostile supervisor. The men soon find themselves between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Moreover, Ennis and Jack also differ from the classic cowboy in their work as sheepherders. Despite an importance in the West's economic history that rivals that of cattle, sheep have been assigned a marginal role in the movies. Traditionally, they have been the source of conflict, their place on the frontier contested as a threat to cattle ranches. In this they have been seen as interlopers, the property of a lower class of immigrants and minorities. Coloring such conflicts have also been hints of a gender motif in the suggestion of caring for sheep as a less manly pursuit. Such tensions have also been exploited for comedy, as in George Marshall's *The Sheepman* (1958), where Glenn Ford is the despised but frustratingly imperturbable sheep rancher. However, from Little Bo Peep to *Ballad of Little Jo* (1993), sheep have often had distaff shepherds. Maggie Greenwald's feminist Western features Suzy Amis as the Eastern woman who finds her salvation out West in her disguise as a man and sheepherder. In *Brokeback* too the sheep suggest a more nurturing, maternal function for the characters, appropriately softening the world of the film. Of course sheep also come to mind, not inaptly here, as the butt of classic sexual comedy in providing the lonely shepherd with a substitute for women.

The trick of *Brokeback Mountain* is to evoke repeatedly at the outset a vast and desolate frontier setting that allows the creation of a passionate relationship, but thereafter to leave behind that space and its possibilities. In the end, for all its promise of a shining glory, *Brokeback Mountain* delivers gloom and an unforgiving reality. As the film unwinds, the wilderness setting is left behind but for brief scenes sandwiched between the domestic norms of the men's lives. The expansive images from the film's early scenes—trucks traversing vast open plains, the huge sheep herd flowing up into the mountain's meadows, Ennis on horseback framed against the horizon like a John Ford hero—shrink to the dimensions of crowded kitchens, closets, trailers, and window-framed views. The awesome scale and reach of the mountain is reduced to a postcard.

The film ends with the traumatized and profoundly alienated Ennis all but a recluse, his world that of a scruffy mobile home that is neither. He watches his about-to-be-wed daughter drive off—another painful scene of farewell, another separation. He finds her forgotten sweater and then rediscovers the earlier forgotten garments, his shirt within Jake's, "like two skins" as the script has it. The images reprise shrinking spaces—the closet, the postcard, the window with its bleak view. He is holding the shirts and crying—"Jack, I swear . . ."

It may be a stretch to invoke Douglas Sirk's delirious Universal 1950s melodramas, but something very like his unmerry-go-round structure, where A loves B who loves C, is clearly operating in the interlocking and frustrated relationships of the film's world. Convention, tradition, and social regulation rule family, gender, sexuality: *Brokeback Mountain* becomes *Written on the Mountain*, or perhaps more aptly, *Back Mountain*. The traditional Western was the province, in Robert Warshow's elegant phrase, of "the last gentlemen,"[10] whom the genre allowed to affirm their identity through action. Although there are brief returns to the wilds, the world of the Western that is created in the film's first forty minutes soon transitions into melodrama, both male and family varieties. Our wilderness types are instantly civilized on their return, cabined, cribbed, and confined. The Western's liberating confrontations and duels, the resolution of personal and communal con-

flicts, is denied these heroes. They become impotent, repressed, oppressed. Their heroism will be forged of sacrifice, victimization, and the long odyssey of suffering that is the classic fate of melodrama's characters. As the years go by the battles they fight are with their families, in kitchens and dining rooms, or with each other at the end of cramped idylls. The film's violence is ugly in the murder of Jack, but also in the emotional attacks both repressed and unleashed, and in the anguish that punishes the couples. Lee's film is careful to give the wives and families their due. After the arrival of Jack after a four-year hiatus, the passionate clinch of their reunion is shown us from Alma's point of view, complicating our relationship with the lovers. Thereafter the film is scrupulous in providing a kind of equal time for the disappointments and despair of the women, their loss of joy and spirit. Jean Renoir's famous dictum comes to mind: everyone has their reasons.

This melding of the Western and the melodrama has received little attention. This is partly the result of the unclear status of the term and of melodrama as a genre. Indeed, more than one reviewer praised the film for avoiding "melodrama":[11] that is, an excess of emotion, melodrama as tearjerker. Would a more florid style have diminished the film, perhaps pushing it toward the baroque rhetoric of a *Johnny Guitar* (1954)? In any case, in *Brokeback Mountain* the marriage of the two genres can be said to interact to mute the film, contributing to the restrained style. The melodrama contains the action, the heroes unable to achieve self-definition, to draw their weapons, to save the ranch, to bring civilization to America. But at the same time the Western's conventions can be said to constrain the melos, lowering the emotional and stylistic peaks, the extreme gestures, the "music" of the melodrama. The result is a haunting, unsettling film that may be easier to admire than love, a bittersweet rendition of defeat and lost opportunity.

The scene of their last rendezvous culminates in a moment that captures the "what-might-have-been" that tortures the men. Ennis's confession that he cannot see Jack for six months precipitates a violent scene. Hurling angry words, they struggle in each other's embrace, fighting and hugging, finally overcome with hurt. We dissolve to a toasty camp fire over which stands a dozy Jack wrapped up from behind by Ennis—"Come on now, you're sleepin' on your feet like a horse"—quoting his mother and quietly humming him her lullaby from his childhood, a moment in which we are suspended with Jack as he is rocked gently from side to side within the embrace, the moment ending with him contemplating Ennis ride off to sleep with the sheep, and then the flashback ending with a desolate Jack in present time watching the truck drive away. That the flashback is crucial—the film's defining Brokeback moment—is underlined by its positioning after their agonized struggle as they separate, unknowingly, for the last time. Their life together has been one of life apart, a life of constant separations, a life separate from all others too, family included. All separate lives. "A few high-altitude fucks," as Jack has said, were not enough. He and Ennis had been denied intimacy, constancy, humanity, soulfulness.

NOTES

This essay is in memory of Jack Babuscio.

1. Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock* (1939), excerpt anthologized as "Home from the Mountain," in *The Book of the Mountains*, ed. A.C. Spectorsky (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1955), 486.
2. Sarah Bixby Smith, *Adobe Days: The Truthful Narrative of the Events in the Life of a California Girl on a Sheep Ranch and in El Pueblo de Nuestra de Los Angeles While It Was Yet a Small and Humble town; Together With An Account of How Three Young Men Drove Sheep & Cattle Across the Plains, Moutains, & Deserts from Illinois to the Pacific Coast; And The Strange Prophecy of Admiral Thatcher About San Pedro Harbor* (1931; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 84.
3. Wolfe, 486.
4. J. Hoberman sees the film as a "sagebrush Tristan and Isolde" in "Blazing Saddles," *Village Voice*, 29 November 2005; Roger Ebert claims "their tragedy is universal" in "*Brokeback Mountain*," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 December 2005.
5. Annie Proulx, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 145.
6. See Roger Clarke, "Lonesome Cowboys," *Sight and Sound* 16, no. 1 (January 2006): 28
7. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 3–7.
8. Frank Waters, "High Country," in Spectorsky, 480.
9. Ibid.
10. Robert Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Anchor / Doubleday, 1962), 94.
11. Ebert, for example.

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ABSTRACT In *Brokeback Mountain*, the grand Western tradition's heroes are deconstructed, and the monumental landscape with its coded promise of freedom and opportunity reduced to the scale of a postcard. *Brokeback Mountain* transforms into melodrama, albeit with a restrained style that disguises its radical take on an America betraying its original ideals.

KEYWORDS Western, neo-Western, melodrama, mountain literature, betraying America

■ ROBIN WOOD

On and around *Brokeback Mountain*

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Embraces: *Brokeback Mountain* and *Making Love*

THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE

Whether this was due to chance or to some really astute planning, *Brokeback Mountain* is (in the context of the Gay Rights movement and contemporary attitudes to gays generally) the ideal film for mainstream audiences today, precisely the film about gay men that the general public is ready for and can accept. Whatever one thinks of the film, its influence can only be positive. Its release coincides with a precise and rapidly developing phase in gay history, the movement towards acceptance and integration . . . "for better or for worse," one might say, but in any case it *has* to happen, there can be no turning back even if one wanted to.

Particularly striking is the difference in audience response and commercial success between *Brokeback Mountain* and its most obvious forerunner, *Making Love*, released in 1982, the first mainstream Hollywood film in which two men kissed on screen.[1] (Are there any such films between these two in which this happens—I mean of course a serious lovers' kiss, not comedy? I can't think of one.) I saw *Making Love* on its initial release (somewhat misguidedly, I think, the studio released it for Valentine's Day!). When the "terrible moment" came there were groans all over the theater and one elderly gentleman made a scene by storming out and shouting abuse.

I saw Ang Lee's movie shortly after its Toronto opening, in a very large auditorium with a very mixed audience. Beside me sat a dignified elderly, Middle Eastern gentleman complete with turban; some rows in front, near the screen, was a group of teenagers, male and female. I'm afraid I assumed (and one should never make such assumptions) that they had come to express their heterosexual superiority aloud and I was all ready to shout back, but they appeared quite rapt throughout the movie, as did the rest of the audience. We have, as the slogan was, "come a long way, Baby!" . . . though not necessarily in the right direction. In Canada we now have gay marriages and this almost happened in the United States. My attitude to this is again ambivalent. On the one hand: yes, if heterosexuals have the right to marriage, why shouldn't gays? On the other hand, why does anyone want to get married any more? It seems, increasingly, a pointless and obsolete institution, its only remaining purpose to make it harder to split up if you're miserable.

The period of *Making Love* was also (roughly) the period in which our progressive Mayor appeared in public supporting Gay Rights and was properly chastised in the local press (memorable headline: "What a QUEER Thing for a Mayor to Do!"); he wasn't re-elected. It was also (roughly) the period of the notorious bathhouse raids, during which one of our cops (motto: "To Serve and Protect") was heard and reported remarking

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to a sympathetic colleague that it was a pity the showers weren't fitted up with gas. (I spent that afternoon in a bathhouse, but missed the raids by about half and hour, having an engagement with a friend.) Those were the days in which almost every day brought on another stimulus to protest, rage, revolution. I imagined that gays, in close alliance with women, blacks, and other racial minorities, would somehow change the world. But, to quote W.B. Yeats out of context, "I was young and foolish / And now am full of tears."

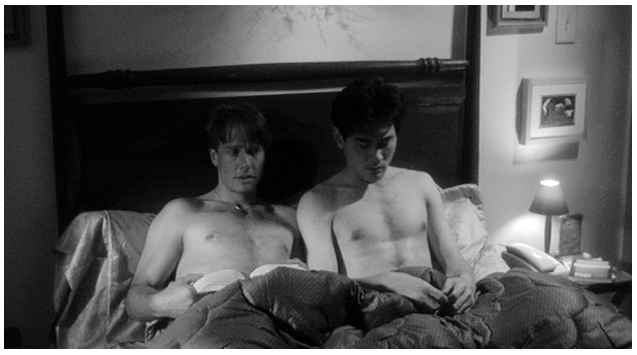
The most blatant evidence of "progress" that is also a process of integration is the development of the annual Gay Pride March. When I first came to Toronto (in 1978) it really *meant* something. There were perhaps a few hundred marchers, bravely carrying banners. There were no advertisements (what company would wish to be associated with such things?), except perhaps for gay bars or shops. There was much booing. Religious groups gathered on the sidewalks to tell us we were all going to Hell. The police were prominent, in case we misbehaved. Today it is a national event. The parade is miles long; no one heckles, no one threatens us with damnation, everyone cheers. And virtually every segment of the parade is advertising something. Our group of a few hundred outlaws has become yet another triumph for corporate capitalism. I used to march in the parade. Today, I don't even watch it. I stay at home and try to shut out the noise.

This, then, is the social context in which I want to place *Brokeback Mountain*. Here we have a film that twenty years ago would have been treated with abhorrence, a film in which, less than a half-hour in, two handsome young men, both familiar to the youth audience, go far beyond the exchange of a carefully prepared and tasteful kiss, having violent and passionate anal sex, and it is greeted by large mixed audiences with almost universal enthusiasm ("universal," that is, within our civilized communities—I can't speak for Texas and the Deep South) and by the critics with universally positive reviews and prophecies (unfulfilled) of best picture at the Oscars. Certainly, it is a better film than *Making Love*—and Ang Lee is a far finer director than Arthur Hiller (though *Making Love* was several steps above Hiller's other work, a well-made movie on a then-dangerous and audacious subject for which he should be forgiven any number of cinematic sins).

They could move to a less oppressive and bigoted cultural situation, though they would probably have to find professions other than sheep-herding and one can't quite picture them as happy bank clerks.

ANG LEE, *AUTEUR?*

What, exactly, is Ang Lee's status today? Are we to see him as an auteur, like Hawks, Ford, and Hitchcock? Has he produced a coherent *oeuvre*? I have been drawn to his films from the outset (or near it—his first film, the Taiwanese *Pushing Hands*, only later became available on laserdisc), but the more he makes the more difficult it becomes to see a pattern. Lee has said that he would like to make a film in every genre and he seems to be realizing this ambition (shall we soon be getting an Ang Lee musical?). Hawks managed this as well (with the significant exception of the domestic melodrama), but his films reveal a perfectly coherent thematic structure, the various genres organized as "action" films (the escape from domesticity) and the comedies (the disruption of domesticity). No such pattern is discernible in Lee's *oeuvre*. He has made one other film about a gay couple and one other Western, but the couple of *The Wedding Banquet* live (on the whole happily) in contemporary New York and are fully accepted in society, and *Ride with the Devil* (for me his finest film and his one commercial disaster) is a Civil War Western. Otherwise, he



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The Wedding Banquet (left) and *Ride with the Devil* (above)

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The seeds of their destinies . . .

seems to be realizing his ambition, in a career ranging from Taiwan to Hollywood and taking in projects ranging from Jane Austen to the Hulk. What is consistent throughout his generic journey is the warmth of his affection and sympathy for his characters and his corresponding excellence with actors (a Hollywood–Taiwanese Jean Renoir, perhaps?). There are no weak performances in Lee's films, from the ensembles of *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *The Wedding Banquet* to the finely nuanced characterizations of Tobey Maguire (*Ride with the Devil*) and Ledger and Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain.*

"BUT ARE THEY *REALLY* GAY?"

The change in climate since the 1970s seems still in many cases to have stopped short of full understanding and acceptance. Some reviewers have questioned whether Ennis and Jack are "really" gay, or just starved for company and sex. After all, if you're stuck up a mountain with no company but one other man and a flock of sheep, which would *you* choose? There was even the suggestion (put tactfully, so as not to offend the gay readership whom you used to be able to offend without a thought) that Ennis wasn't gay at all until Jack led him astray (the old "contagion" theory that one hoped had died with the dinosaurs). In some reviews this preference for Ennis over Jack became a preference for the actor, singling out Ledger for high praise at Gyllenhaal's expense. (Both seem to me perfect.) Again, the preference seems tinged by a lingering, perhaps quite unconscious, homophobia: Ennis, after all, struggled manfully to make his marriage work, to be a good husband and father, while Jack was always ready to cross down to Mexico for anonymous sex in dark alleys, something to which Ennis would never have stooped. I think a close look at a sequence of eight shots at (almost) the beginning of the film should set this straight, so to speak.

The sequence occurs when Jack drives into the yard in his truck, about two minutes into the film. I am assuming here a gay spectator who has read the reviews and therefore already knows something of the plot.

1. *Long shot. Ennis is waiting by the office steps, left. The truck arrives noisily, right. Jack gets out, kicks the bumper. Ennis watches.* The shot establishes Jack as active, Ennis passive, not necessarily of course in terms of sexual acts but in terms of aggression versus caution.
2. *Medium shot. Jack turns slowly, hands on hips, then begins to move towards Ennis, then stops, watches.* Always the aggressor, Jack is displaying himself, an "object for the gaze," though of course hesitant and uncertain, testing things.
3. *Close up, Ennis. He lowers his head, face now shadowed by hat.* Lack of interest? Or denial?
4. *Close up, Jack.* Looking at Ennis. He lowers his head, face shaded, but there's the hint of a smile.

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. . . are planted

5. *Close up, Ennis.* He looks at Jack, then quickly lowers his head again so that Jack can't see his face. Heterosexual or just not interested? Or just cautious?
6. *Medium close up. Jack, leaning back against the truck, one hand on his belt, the other stretched out (invitingly?), lowers his head to catch Ennis reflected in the driving mirror.*
7. *Ennis reflected, an "object for the gaze."*
8. *Close up. Jack shaving . . . for the Boss, due to arrive? Or for Ennis?*

To what genre, then, does *Brokeback Mountain* belong? Surely it is Lee's first tragedy, in the strict, "classical" sense, as opposed to a film with an unhappy ending, which he had already given us with *The Ice Storm.* Its two heroes are doomed from the start, and by that venerable definer of tragedy the "tragic flaw" — first, because they are gay, within a time (1963) and a cultural situation that still finds gays abhorrent, unnatural, cowardly, despicable, and so forth; second, because they have both to some extent (though with different results) internalized their society's condemnation even as they rebel against it. They *could* live together quietly and unobtrusively, for which the penalty would probably be nothing worse than ostracism, isolation, and a few insults shouted in the street. They could also move to a less oppressive and bigoted cultural situation, though they would probably have to find professions other than sheepherding and one can't quite picture them as happy bank clerks. Ennis carries the heavier burden because he fights against himself—against his *real* self; he would surely have been disgusted by Jack's nocturnal back-alley escapades. The inevitability of tragedy is the inevitability of the film: looking back from the end, one can see that the seeds of the two men's diverse destinies are already planted in those eight shots.

NOTE

1. The only precursor I know of is *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* (1971), not Hollywood and scarcely "mainstream," though even for "art-house" audiences the kiss came as quite a shock. Peter Finch, asked on TV by an interviewer rather obviously expecting one of those "I'm just an actor" disclaimers, delightfully adapted the proverbial Victorian wife's "I just closed my eyes and thought about England."

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ABSTRACT *Brokeback Mountain* is the first gay film to achieve major box-office success, testament to the progressive integration of homosexuality in liberal North American communities. The film can furthermore be argued to be the first tragedy in Ang Lee's filmmaking career, its poignant outcome foreshadowed in its opening shots.

KEYWORDS genre, tragedy, gay cinema, homosexual equality, acting

■ CHRIS BERRY

The Chinese Side of the Mountain

AT FIRST SIGHT, IT MAY BE difficult to see that, just like Everest, *Brokeback Mountain* has a less well-known Chinese side.[1] After all, *Brokeback Mountain* is a Western. Surely, there is nothing more American than a Western? However, part of what is new about the film is precisely its Chinese side. First, the film is not only distinguished from most other Westerns by mixing in melodrama. Rather, as with all of Ang Lee's films, it also uses the codes of a very specifically Chinese form of melodrama. Popular in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and throughout Southeast Asia during the time of Lee's childhood, this is the "family ethics" film. Second, *Brokeback* is also different from Lee's other films because it draws on another regional subcultural tradition—popular culture stories produced for and often by straight women about love between two handsome young men. These come in various forms and go by different names in different places, including *yaoi*, *Tanbi*, *Danmei*, Boy's Love, and *tongrennü*.

Lee's films can be divided into two groups: his Asian films (*Pushing Hands* [1992], *The Wedding Banquet* [1993], *Eat Drink Man Woman* [1994], and

Heath Ledger (left) and Jake Gyllenhaal

A Focus Features release © 2005 Focus Features. Photo: Kimberly French

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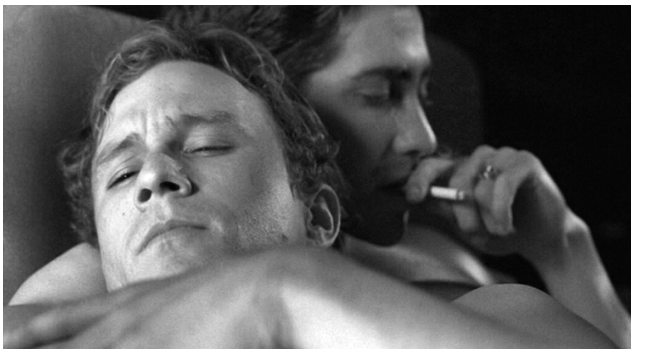

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A kind of domesticity

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon [2000]) and his Western films (*Sense and Sensibility* [1995], *The Ice Storm* [1997], *Ride with the Devil* [1999], and *Hulk* [2003], as well as *Brokeback Mountain*). In the Asian films, ambiguities present themselves straightforwardly as a contest between "traditional Confucian" values and more recent "modern Western" ones. When *The Wedding Banquet* ends with a freeze frame of the Chinese patriarch raising his hands, does this connote surrender or victory? When Jen throws herself off the bridge at the end of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is she a criminal committing suicide or a legendary heroine flying off into the clouds? At first sight, *Brokeback Mountain* doesn't seem to have anything particularly "Asian" about it to generate similar ambiguities. But the mix of Hollywood family melodrama with the Chinese family-ethics film performs this function.

Various Chinese terms are used to translate "melodrama." But in the Hong Kong and Taiwan of Ang Lee's youth, the *jiating lunli pian* or family-ethics film was especially popular. Both the Hollywood family melodrama and the Chinese family-ethics film are focused on the family. They are not, however, the same thing. Ang Lee brings elements from the Chinese tradition into his Hollywood films. If melodrama is understood as a form where a struggle is staged between premodern values that still persist and modern values,[2] then Ang Lee also produces this as a struggle between two (enmeshed) cultural systems and two forms of melodrama.

In Hollywood family melodrama, on the one hand, the main struggle concerns an individual's efforts to break free of the family and to become a full and independent individual. A story structured around the conflict between romantic love and family is typical. Romantic love must win (whether or not the family agrees in the end) and so the film usually ends with the formation of a couple.[3] On the other hand, in the family-ethics film, Confucian-derived values dictate that our primary concern is less with the fate of the individual and more with the fate of the family itself. As a result, the struggle is between an individual's sense of duty and their selfish personal desires. Duty tends to triumph. Even though the result may be sad, at least the person who renounces desire is good. A good and dutiful man does not give in to sexual desire or romance unless his family agrees. It is sometimes possible to reconcile contradictions between personal desire and duty, in which case the result is a comedy like *The Wedding Banquet*. However, the tragedy of self-sacrifice is at least as common in the family-ethics film.[4]

If we see *Brokeback Mountain* as a Hollywood-style family melodrama, then it can be understood as the struggle of Ennis to break free from conservative family values. His lover Jack is ready to leave his family so that the two men can set up a small ranch together. However, Ennis is haunted by memories of the brutal and homophobic murder of an old rancher in the area where he grew up, not least because his deeply conservative father took him to see the man's body to teach him a lesson.

However, Ennis does not reconcile his desires with his background and in many ways the film is a tragedy. This is because *Brokeback Mountain* is at least as much a family-ethics film as a family melodrama. In many ways, Jack takes on the role of a common figure in many family-ethics films—the woman who tempts a man from his duty. Although he is the one who pursues Ennis, he is feminized in many other ways. For example, at first it is Jack who goes up on to the slopes to tend the sheep and Ennis who keeps the campsite. But it turns out Ennis is not much good in the "domestic" role and so they swap. When they do have sex, although Jack initiates, the film makes it very clear that from the start Ennis is the active partner. Later on, when Jack gets married, even his wife is the boss in the family. She

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Paternal authority in *The Wedding Banquet*

is from a rich family and runs the business, while he does as he is told as her salesman.

Ennis is not married when he begins his relationship with Jack. However, Jack's seduction of Ennis constitutes a transgression not only in terms of conservative moral values. Jack and Ennis's employer has specified that one of them is to stay on the mountain with the sheep every night and it is this rule that Jack causes Ennis to break. (The full ambiguity of Lee's films is realized here by making the employer's demand also one that breaks the forest service's rules.)

Ennis's struggle between duty and his personal desire takes on more classic family-ethics film dimensions after he marries and has two daughters. Even though his wife divorces him some time after she finds out what is really going on between the two men, Ennis struggles between his continuing duty to his daughters and his relationship with Jack. In one scene, Jack drives all the way from Texas to Wyoming, having misinterpreted the news of Ennis's divorce as a signal that they can be together. When he arrives, Ennis explains that he has custody of the girls for the weekend. Jack has to leave. If it is not his duty to his daughters that keeps him from seeing Jack, then it is his duty to work. In a later scene on the mountain, Ennis tells Jack that he will not be able to see him for a number of months because he cannot get the time off work. He explains that when he was younger, he would have abandoned the job and found a new one, but it is no longer so easy to do this.

From a very conventional Confucian point of view, Jack becomes the one who tempts Ennis from his duty. Therefore, since Ennis is not strong enough to renounce him, Jack must be eliminated before Ennis can be a good man. After Jack has been murdered in a gay-bashing, the film ends with one of Ennis's daughters visiting to tell him she is getting married and invite him to the wedding. At first, Ennis tells her he will be unable to attend because he has to go on a round-up, the same reason he gave for being unable to spend time with Jack during the scene up on Brokeback. But then, after a moment's hesitation, he changes his mind, telling her he will give up his job to attend her wedding. The difference is clear. With Jack, he had to give up his personal desire to stick to his duty. But with his daughter, duty to family trumps duty to employer. After she has left, the film closes with Ennis caressing the only thing he has from Jack—the shirt his mother gave him when he went to visit after Jack's death. It is a beautiful moment and we sense the price that Ennis has paid. But those of us who are gay may also be thinking about the even greater price Jack has paid.

This ending is in fact as ambiguous as the endings of *The Wedding Banquet* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. And just like them, the ambiguities are played out across the value systems of different eras, cultures, and genres. Within the terms of the family-ethics film, this ending achieves full tragic impact because Ennis has succeeded and matured by sacrificing his love to his duty. But within the terms of the Hollywood family melodrama, the tragedy is one of failure because Ennis has been blocked by social homophobia and the demands of the heterosexual family system, is never able to mature as an individual, and remains thwarted. If you see the film from a traditional family-ethics point of view, then it upholds certain values. But from a contemporary family-melodrama point of view, it is a protest against the same values.

Nearly all of Ang Lee's films deploy this tension between Hollywood and Chinese forms of melodrama. But what is different about *Brokeback Mountain* is that it is also draws on *yaoi* or *tongrennü* culture. By this I mean that it stages a gay male love story for female audiences. In one sense, this is very easy to understand. As a mainstream film, *Brokeback Mountain* was never intended only or even primarily for gay audiences. They would be too few to sustain a mainstream release. But when a straight couple is deciding which film they will go to see on a Saturday night, who do you think decides they will see *Brokeback Mountain*? The man or the woman? The answer is obvious. Not many straight men would suggest seeing a gay love story.

But why is staging a gay love story for straight women viewers a kind of Asianization of Hollywood? In fact, there is a subculture of western women who also like to consume and compose gay male love stories. This is the "slash" subculture, known for appropriating popular buddy couples like Captain Kirk and Doctor Spock from *Star Trek* and writing love stories featuring them as a gay couple.[5] However, this subculture remains relatively small and is not widely known.

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The conflict between family and romance

In contrast, a much more widespread and visible culture of gay male love stories for female consumption has developed in East Asia. Starting in Japan some thirty years ago as y*aoi* appropriations and rewriting, these rapidly developed into the production of original manga presenting male-to-male romances for female readers. Whereas "slash" remains a little-known subculture, these manga are publicly available in stores everywhere in Japan.[6]

Over the last couple of decades, this culture has spread beyond Japan and throughout East and much of Southeast Asia. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, for example, it is known as *tongrennü* culture, according to the Mandarin Chinese pronunciation of the *kanji* (Chinese characters) used to write "yaoi" in Japanese. The Internet has facilitated the rapid proliferation of this culture. As you will discover if you search for "yaoi" at Amazon's website, not only are Japanese originals now available in English but original English-language *yaoi* manga are being produced. One publisher, Yaoi Press, had a title, *Stallion*, to promote in the wake of *Brokeback Mountain*. Just as the market for this material has grown, it has also proliferated in terms of both subgenres and narrative variations. Initially, two generic variations occurred. One consisted of romantic stories featuring young teenagers and no sex. These are generally known as "Boy's Love" (BL) stories. The other variation involves older men and increasingly graphic sex.

How does *Brokeback Mountain* relate to this proliferation of *yaoi* and *tongrennü* culture, and of texts that play on the growing popularity of this material? Although it is true that the film was adapted from a story by Annie Proulx, I am not sure that the original could be described as a text that presents male-to-male sex for female pleasure.[7] Also, the film deviates from the conventions of *yaoi* and *tongrennü* culture in one important way: it includes women romantically or maritally connected to the main male characters.[8] Ennis and Jack's wives are certainly sympathetic figures and "innocent" victims of their husbands' infidelities. However, women consumers of *yaoi* and *tongrennü* culture are believed not to want to be reminded of unhappy or forced marriages because many of them are thought to be escaping such circumstances through the consumption of *yaoi* and *tongrennü* culture.

Nevertheless, *Brokeback Mountain* does seem to me to (consciously or unconsciously) borrow from *yaoi* and *tongrennü* culture in its efforts to produce a text about a male-to-male sexual and romantic relationship that will appeal to the most important audience for it: women. In this it is following a well-established pattern in East and Southeast Asia. As *yaoi* and *tongrennü* culture has prolif-

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Gay couples in *Lan Yu* (left) and *Formula 17*

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Cover art for *Stallion* by KÔSEN

erated, it has begun to impact upon more mainstream materials, ranging from literature to television and film. The appearance and growth of gay male texts from East Asia correlates not only to the appearance and growth of gay culture in the region,[9] but also to *yaoi* and *tongrennü* culture. Indeed, many of the texts have a high level of female involvement. For example, Stanley Kwan's film *Lan Yu* (2001), about a gay relationship set against the backdrop of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, was adapted from an Internet novel written by a woman. The Taiwanese film *Formula 17* (*Shiqi Sui de Tiankong*, 2004), a romantic comedy about a young man from the countryside who finds true gay love in Taipei, was written by a woman (Rady Fu), directed by a woman (Chen Yin-jung), and produced by two women (Aileen Li and Michelle Yeh).[10] *Lan Yu* was Stanley Kwan's most commercially successful film in a while and *Formula 17* was the only Taiwanese film of that year that made its money back (twice over) at the local box office. It is doubtful if the audience for either film was only or primarily gay men. Similarly, gay-themed television dramas have appeared and been more popular than a solely gay male audience would make possible. In 2003, Pai Hsien-yung's classic novel *Crystal Boys*, about a group of homeless young men who gather in New Park in Taipei and hustle for money, was adapted into a twenty-part series.

Second, as in all *yaoi* and *tongrennü* texts, the men are young and attractive. One western female commentator enthused about the *Crystal Boys* television series that, "The cast alone is enough to excite many Taiwanese movie fans, as it gathers together the best-looking group of Taiwanese actors ever to perform in a TV drama."[11] In Proulx's story, Ennis and Jack become middle-aged and out-of-shape. Of course, it is normal for Hollywood to cast attractive actors in lead roles. But the casting of young heart-throb actors like Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal takes the convention one step further and follows the pattern of East Asian films and television series with maximum *yaoi* and *tongrennü* appeal like *Formula 17* and the *Crystal Boys* series.

Finally, the nature of the relationship between Ennis and Jack mimics many of the conventions of *yaoi* and *tongrennü* stories. Within the web postings and discussions on *yaoi* and *tongrennü*, a lot of interest focuses on who is paired with whom. In the case of materials composed by the fans, the question concerns which characters from a television series or a European football team pair off. These discussions are governed by one clear rule: as in straight sex, there must be a clear "top" (or "active" partner) and "bottom" (or "passive" partner). It is possible to have a "strong" bottom and a "weak" top (meaning the bottom initiates and directs the relationship), or even a "weak" top and a "weak" bottom (creating a challenge for the *tongrennü* author to figure out a way of bringing the pair together).[12] However, what is known in the gay community as "flip-flopping" or less graphically, being "versatile," is not known in *yaoi* and *tongrennü* texts.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, the men are represented as being subject to a sexual urge that is beyond their efforts to control and which, when realized, is powerful to the point of physical pain. Although I imagine the images in *yaoi* and *tongrennü* manga would be too graphic to reproduce in *Film Quarterly*, they certainly present this kind of sexual force. Second, it is made absolutely clear that Ennis is the top and Jake is the bottom in the tent scene when Jake not only seduces Ennis but also goes on all fours and presents his rear end to Ennis. In the terminology of *tongrennü* culture, Jake is a classic "strong" bottom and Ennis is a "weak" top.

All in all, the closer you look at *Brokeback Mountain*, the more it appears to have an Asian or Chinese side.

NOTES

1. This essay is drawn from a public lecture presented at the School of Journalism in Fudan University (Shanghai) on 31 May 2006. I thank the audience for their questions and responses, which have informed this final work.
2. The primary source for this argument is Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976).
3. Much of the discussion here is based on Thomas Schatz's chapter on "The Family Melodrama" in *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1981). Since then, other film scholars have taken on board Brooks's work and argued for seeing film melodrama as a mode like realism or the fantastic and not only as a genre.
4. For a more detailed discussion of the family-ethics film, see Chris Berry, "*Wedding Banquet*: A Family (Melodrama) Affair," in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes* (London: BFI Publishing, 2003), ed. Berry, 183–90.
5. Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London: Verso, 1997).
6. Mark McLelland, "Male Homosexuality and Popular Culture in Modern Japan," *Intersections* 3 (1998), http://wwwsshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue3/mclelland2.html.
7. Annie Proulx, *Brokeback Mountain* (New York: Scribner, 2005).
8. Thanks to Akiko Mizoguchi for this important point.
9. This is one of the phenomena that is discussed as triggering Dennis Altman's *Global Sex* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
10. For further discussion of this film, see Brian Hu, "*Formula 17*: Testing a Formula for Mainstream Cinema in Taiwan," http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/05/34/formula_17.html.
11. Anna Maria Paoluzzi, "Re: Taiwanese Cinema," 14 June 2004, http://www.translatorscafe.com/cafe/MegaBBS/threadview.asp?threadid=2369&posts=14 (accessed 27 June 2006).
12. I want to thank my teaching assistant at Fudan, Wu Changchang, for introducing me to mainland Chinese *tongrennü* culture.

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ABSTRACT *Brokeback Mountain* not only differs from most other Westerns by mixing in melodrama, but also uses a very specifically Chinese form of melodrama known as the "family ethics" film. Furthermore, it also draws on another regional subcultural tradition —comics produced for and by straight women but about love between two young men.

KEYWORDS family-ethics film, Chinese melodrama, manga, *yaoi*, Ang Lee

■ ARA OSTERWEIL

Ang Lee's Lonesome Cowboys

BACK IN THE TECHNICOLOR days when occluded gay subtexts made young cinephiles like Vito Russo, author of *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), suspect that some characters—played by actors like Rock Hudson or Anthony Perkins—were not what they seemed, the notion of a big-budget Hollywood romance starring two A-list heart-throbs as gay cowboys, would have been unthinkable. Compared to the mid-century requirements of Hollywood's closet, *Brokeback Mountain*'s explicit representation of a gay love story signifies an enormous breakthrough for mainstream cinema. However, by presenting this story through the established codes of Hollywood melodrama, *Brokeback Mountian* ultimately contains the radicalism of its subject matter through generic conservatism. In a way that recalls John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969)—another "breakthrough" film—the same-sex protagonists in *Brokeback Mountain* are required to *suffer* for their love. By putting *Brokeback Mountain* into dialogue with both *Midnight Cowboy* and its underground predecessor, Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys* (1967), I aim to articulate what is at stake in the mainstream representation of tragic homosexuality.

Perhaps the tensions between *Brokeback Mountain*'s radical subject matter and its tragic, ultimately conservative resolution can be partially explained by the film's ambiguous generic status. A strange fusion between a Douglas Sirk melodrama and a John Ford Western, *Brokeback Mountain* deals in both virtue *and* virility. While the film flaunts the apparent masculinity of its protagonists by depicting Ennis and Jack as rugged heroes in a harsh Western landscape, it simultaneously emasculates or feminizes them by casting them as unwitting victims of an unyieldingly heterosexual and patriarchal society. Though they may superficially resemble screen cowboys, Ang Lee's protagonists can actually be usefully situated in a long lineage of melodramatic heroines—played by Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Barbara Stanwyck in *Stella Dallas* (1937), Jane Wyman in *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), or Julianne Moore in *Far From Heaven* (2002).

Like the heroines in these screen melodramas, Ennis and Jack suffer for the transgression of choosing a socially unacceptable love object. And according to the conventions of the genre, Ennis and Jack must be punished in order for their essential innocence to be recognized. In the nineteenth-century stage set by the melodramatic imagination, the sacrifice of desire was rewarded, or at least compensated, by the belated revelation of virtue. Whether the attraction was for an Asian man (or, in the case of D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, a white actor in "yellowface"), a same-sex child, a younger, working-class man (or in the case of Douglas Sirk's *All that Heaven Allows,* a homosexual actor in "straightface"), or an African American man, transgressive desire required the destruction or abandonment of the love object. In *Stella Dallas, All That Heaven Allows*, and *Far From Heaven*, the love object is renounced in order to satisfy the oppressive demands of a patriarchal society that refuses to accommodate desires that challenge class, age, and racial taboos. Likewise, Ennis is forced to renounce his true love object and resolve himself to loss and emotional sacrifice. However, whereas *Stella* and the two *Heaven*s were content with the mere *renunciation* of the love object, *Brokeback Mountain* reaches for an even more tragic, and ultimately more conservative, resolution. Like Lillian Gish's character in *Broken Blossoms*, who meets a gruesome end at the hand of her brutal father, Jack is beaten to death. *Brokeback Mountain* suggests a Griffith-style resolution of "sin" through violent death and misery. By depicting his characters as innocent victims of an intolerant society, Lee has replaced the lachrymose women of mid-century screen melodrama with hunky proto-gays who just can't help what they do, in spite of all their strident efforts to "quit" each other. The tragic outcome is the same.

But tragedy need not necessarily have been the outcome. There are alternative, less generically conserva-

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Brokeback Mountain's echoes of *Midnight Cowboy*?

tive modes of affect available, especially considering that *Brokeback Mountain* is set during the peak of Underground Cinema, when gay experimental filmmakers like Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, and Jack Smith proposed camp laughter as a viable alternative to tragic weeping. *Brokeback Mountain* opens in the summer of 1963, the same year that Warhol first trained a 16mm camera on his cadre of homosexuals, transvestites, and androgynes to the scandalous delight of the New York art world. 1963 was also the year that marked the debut of Anger's experimental classic *Scorpio Rising*, a homoerotic, sadomasochistic homage to a gang of leather-clad bikers that is widely recognized as the prototype for the MTV-style rock music video. And although you'd never know it from *Brokeback Mountain*'s bleak emotional landscape, 1963 was also the year that underground *enfant terrible* Jack Smith made *Flaming Creatures*, his scandalous and much-censored film about frolicking drag queens who are resurrected from their graves. Although Jack and Ennis meet only six years before the Stonewall riots, the promise of gay rights (and sexual revolution in general) does not even register as a speck on the distant horizon of the emerging red states.

Contrary to popular knowledge, *Brokeback Mountain* is not the first American film to focus on gay cowboys. In 1967, Andy Warhol's raucous quasi-avant-garde film *Lonesome Cowboys*—which Lee admits to never having seen—queered the treasured icon of American consciousness with impunity. Shot on a movie-made Main Street in Oracle, Arizona, *Lonesome Cowboys* tells the story—or rather, avoids telling the story—of the erotic confrontations between an outlaw gang and the townspeople they languidly attempt to seduce. In typical Warholian fashion, the film eschews traditional narrative form, opting instead for long, quasi-indifferent erotic glances at the beautiful, fetishized bodies of its mostly male cast in various stages of cowboy dress and undress. Made in the liminal moment between the avant-porn Underground in the early 1960s, and the commercialization of hardcore porn in the early 1970s, *Lonesome Cowboys* is itself a generic outlaw. Flirting with, but ultimately refusing, the conventions of either the Western, which it paro-

© 1919 D.W. Griffith Productions, Paramount Pictures

Forbidden love in *Broken Blossoms*

dies, or the porn feature, which it limply anticipates, Warhol's softcore, soft-narrative experiment celebrates the fluidity of erotic desire while puncturing the artifice of Hollywood with moments of self-conscious, rapturous, experimental form.

Though *Lonesome Cowboys* is apolitical, in its casual rejection of defined sexual roles, its deliberate confusion of homosexual and heterosexual pairings, its campy celebration of sadomasochism, and its polymorphous, floundering erotic gaze, it is both a product and parody of 1960s sexual-revolution politics. Rejecting all modes of narrative closure, gender stability, or moral reconciliation, *Lonesome Cowboys* casually dismissed the closet by depicting erotic desire that signifies nothing but itself. None of the varieties of sexual "perversion" that are featured in the film, including the rape of the sadistic town sheriff (played with frigid abandon by Warhol superstar Viva) by a bunch of bored fags, or male-on-male fucking and fellatio, are treated as anything remarkable.

In spite of the director's own seeming indifference to the potential shock value of his subject matter, Warhol's foray into the illicit urges of cowboys was considered subversive enough to incite the FBI to open an investigation into the Swish King of Pop Art.[1] At the suggestion of the FBI, who critiqued the film for its explicit display of "homosexual tendencies," as well as its depictions of "sexual relationships of homosexual and heterosexual nature," *Lonesome Cowboys* was repeatedly seized by local authorities and threatened with an obscenity case.[2] Yet in spite of the moral outrage Warhol's film elicited (or perhaps because of it), *Lonesome Cowboys* was not only shown in commercial theaters around the nation, but went on to win the best film award at the San Francisco Film Festival in 1968.

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Forbidden love in *Far from Heaven*

Lonesome Cowboy's startling crossover success inspired director John Schlesinger to make his own, significantly tamed version of male love and camaraderie while Warhol was recovering in the hospital from a gunshot wound. Schlesinger's moving story about the supposedly platonic friendship between an unworldly cowboy and the malformed pickpocket who mothers him featured several of Warhol's superstars, including Viva, Ultra Violet, and Paul Morrissey, alongside A-list stars Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman. Unlike *Lonesome Cowboys*, however, *Midnight Cowboy* was a tried-and-true Hollywood product. Not only did it take pains to avoid suggesting an explicitly sexual relationship between Voight's and Hoffman's characters in spite of their shared living quarters and emotional intimacy, but it eliminated whatever threat it posed to normative sexuality in a majestic, melodramatic ending. Like the melodramatic films that were *Midnight Cowboy*'s true precursors, the illicit object choice must die in order to preserve the dominance of heterosexuality. As in *Brokeback Mountain*, in *Midnight Cowboy* it is the more effeminate, more diminutive, more expressive, and ultimately less complacent protagonist whose pound of flesh is demanded. When Ratso Rizzo dies a bleak, unheralded death of an unspecified, incurable, and invisible disease while riding on a bus in search of a new and better future with Joe Buck, Schlesinger succeeds in eliminating the threat of queer contamination.

In many ways, *Brokeback Mountain* can be regarded as a hybrid of *Lonesome Cowboys* and *Midnight Cowboy*. Like *Lonesome Cowboys*, *Brokeback Mountain* is explicit about the homosexual relationship at its center; unlike *Midnight Cowboy*, the relationship between Jack and Ennis is not disguised under the guise of platonic camaraderie. And yet, like *Midnight Cowboy*, the mode of *Brokeback Mountain* is strictly melodramatic. Rather than figuring gay sex as the site of camp masquerade and polymorphous perversity as Warhol does, Lee imagines the sexual relationship between men as a source of unremitting heartbreak and tragedy. Whereas Warhol mocked the taboo against homosexuality through flagrant, campy disregard of generic and social convention, Lee enslaves the representation homosexuality to the very conventions that Underground filmmakers so radically dismissed.

Unlike Warhol's films, which were—with the notable exception of *Chelsea Girls* (1966)—never widely distributed, both *Midnight Cowboy* and *Brokeback Mountain* succeeded commercially in mainstream theaters. In spite of a self-imposed X-rating that elevated its box office without tarnishing its reputation, *Midnight Cowboy* won the Oscar for best picture in 1969, rendering the seedy life of an urban hustler fit for mainstream consumption. In his memoirs of the 1960s, Warhol himself expressed frustration with Schlesinger's polished take on Underground cinema. While Warhol concedes that *Midnight Cowboy* represented a turning point in the history of film (as *Brokeback Mountain* would be later), he bemoaned what kind of turning point it was. He wrote: "Now it was clear that there were two types of people doing counter-culture-type things—the ones who wanted to be commercial and successful and move right up into the mainstream of society with their stuff, and the ones who wanted to stay where they were, outside society. The way to be counterculture and have mass commercial success was to say and do radical things in a conservative format."[3] By this account, *Midnight Cowboy* co-opted the taboo subject matter of the Underground and made it fit for mainstream consumption. By containing the potential shock value of same-sex love through reliance on accessible, unthreatening, and conventional forms, *Midnight Cowboy* sacrificed radical content for mainstream popularity. Warhol lamented the sacrifice, declaring *Midnight Cowboy* the cinematic equivalent of having "a well-choreographed, well-scored, anti-Establishment 'hippie be-in' in a well-ventilated, well-located theater."[4] In other words, *Midnight Cowboy* was to *Lonesome Cowboys* what *Hair* was to Allan Kaprow's happenings.

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Viva cast in *Midnight Cowboy* and the film's tragic conclusion

Lee's lovesick cowboys are no flaming creatures. When Jack is sent to an early grave, there is no chance of campy resurrection.

Brokeback Mountain can be understood as the latest episode in this history of co-optation of the counterculture by mainstream American cinema. As a film described by Lee himself as a "middle-of-the-road treatment" of a potentially controversial subject that takes pains to avoid offense, *Brokeback Mountain* is therefore simultaneously a gauge of how far we, as a society, have and have *not* come in the nearly forty years since Warhol's landmark film. As Lee discussed in an interview with me, his desire to provide "neither more nor less" than Proulx's sparse description was a calculated decision to respect the elegance of the author's prose. It was also intended to "shock audiences without making the scene too uncomfortable to watch, to allow them to delight in the destruction of the taboo without feeling too intimidated." Owing to the notorious diversity of people's attitudes towards obscenity, Lee conceded that, "while some people will find it too shocking, others won't find it shocking enough." Although the director imagined that "the majority of viewers would indeed be stunned," he hoped that "it will be a positive, liberating shock that gets them invested in the tragic love story" that is the film's main focus. For some viewers, this may actually entail "blocking the sex scene out and then continuing to watch the film."

While it would have been unrealistic for two young studs who refuse to identify as "queer" to begin their tryst with a tender embrace, the resemblance between their aggressive lovemaking and a saloon brawl seems yet another way that Lee refuses to compromise their masculinity. Apparently, certain legends of the frontier—such as the self-sufficient, tough-as-nails cowboy—remain too precious to demystify. Although their Marlboro man apparel invites as much fetishizing as the tight leather biker uniforms in *Scorpio Rising*, Lee's lovesick cowboys are no flaming creatures. When Jack is sent to an early grave, there is no chance of campy resurrection.

With *Brokeback Mountain*, Ang Lee succeeded in breaking the mainstream Hollywood taboo on homosexuality at the expense of creating a truly radical film. In an industry long defined by the invisibility or demonization of gay characters, Lee's Oscar-winning romance about two gay cowboys seemed to herald the final dismantling of Tinseltown's celluloid closet. Like the establishment of the Production Code in 1934, or the commercial exhibition of *Deep Throat* in 1972, *Brokeback Mountain*'s debut in 2005 may prove a watershed moment in the sexual history of Hollywood. Critic B. Ruby Rich has rightfully described *Brokeback* as the kind of rare film that "changes our perceptions so much that cinema history thereafter has to arrange itself around it."[5] While in the future, we may find ourselves neatly dividing Hollywood history between its pre-*Brokeback*, and post-*Brokeback* phases, we must also recognize the compromises that Hollywood continues to demand from filmmakers who wish to broach radical subjects in resolutely commercial formats. Like many Hollywood breakthroughs, *Brokeback Mountain* reveals the extent to which entry into the mainstream requires the sacrifice of countercultural subversiveness. While the success of both *Brokeback Mountain* and *Midnight Cowboy* suggest that controversial subjects are not *completely* incompatible with Hollywood treatment, they also imply that mainstream audiences prefer their gay sex with cathartic tears of tragedy rather than the crocodile tears of camp.

NOTES

1. Margia Kramer, "The Warhol File," in *Andy Warhol: Film Factory*, ed. Michael O'Pray (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), 178.
2. Ibid., 181.
3. Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol 1960s* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 250.
4. Ibid, 250.
5. B. Ruby Rich, "Hello Cowboy," *Guardian*, 23 September 2005.

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ABSTRACT By situating the film's tragic representation of homosexuality within the tradition of melodrama, this article questions whether *Brokeback Mountain* truly challenges mainstream taboos. Like *Midnight Cowboy*, *Brokeback Mountain* casts its radical subject matter within an ultimately conservative generic paradigm rather than camping it up in the manner of Andy Warhol's *Lonesome Cowboys*.

KEYWORDS *Brokeback Mountain*, melodrama, homosexuality, *Midnight Cowboy*, Andy Warhol

■ B. RUBY RICH

Brokering *Brokeback*: Jokes, Backlashes, and Other Anxieties

WORD ON *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* had been building long before its release. Distributors, publicists, and other industry representatives speak of the initial impact on them of Annie Proulx's story in the *New Yorker* of 13 October 1997.[1] Passed around in tattered xeroxes in a decade when Internet links were not yet ubiquitous, the story deeply moved many people. Among them were Diana Ossama, who immediately made her writing partner Larry McMurty read it, too. The pair contacted Proulx and, once she agreed to their plan to turn it into a screenplay, used their own money to option the rights. They didn't expect it to take seven years to be made, but it did. Eventually, Ang Lee's longtime screenwriter and producer, James Schamus, assumed a leadership position at Focus Features, putting him in a position to exercise an option on the screenplay and finance the project. Schamus and Lee announced the project in 2002. The casting of Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal was announced in 2003. *Brokeback Mountain* became real to the press, launching the tag "the gay cowboy movie" into the American vernacular.

While the signing of up-and-coming actors with major sex appeal was thrilling to some and titillating to others, the gay press was preoccupied with rumors: Lee and Schamus were going to downplay the homosexuality and make the story more heterosexual, the actors had no chemistry, and so on. The distrust of their plans for the film was somewhat peculiar, given that the team had started their partnership on *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), an early gay comedy; that Schamus had been an executive producer on such early New Queer Cinema films as *Poison* (1992) and *Swoon* (1993); and that Good Machine, the precursor to Focus Features, had produced *The Laramie Project* for HBO in 2002.

Brokeback Mountain had its world premiere at the Venice Film Festival on 2 September 2005, its U.S. premiere at the Telluride Film Festival the next day, and its Canadian premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival on 10 September,[2] almost simultaneously with the news of its winning the Golden Lion at Venice. In the six months between these premieres and the Academy Awards ceremony, *Brokeback Mountain* became a cultural phenomenon, the rare film that could jump out of the film section entirely to become hard news and editorial-page fodder, a subject of parody, a controversy, a matter of pride. The uses that were made of the film transformed it from a marketplace product into a signifier of personal worth, political position, and cultural values, accelerating the process by which, more commonly, classic films organically acquire meanings and communities years after their initial release.

In the fall of 2005, Focus Features carried out a canny marketing strategy.[3] Its "platformed" release rolled the film out first to the prestige festivals, opened selectively in major markets, and only then rolled out slowly to more and more theaters in ever-wider sectors of the U.S., first expanding to 483 theaters, up to 1,200 screens by late January, and finally far more in the lead-up to and after the Oscars. Interestingly, during this process, the anxiety that had characterized the gay (or, to use current nomenclature, the LGBT) community's response prior to the film's completion now shifted to the mainstream.

Instead of fretting over whether the film would be heterosexualized, though, the mainstream press focused attention on how the the film would do: would it make much money? Would anyone who wasn't gay pay to see it? Would anyone outside major cities go to see it? Would it break any box-office records? In other words, the anxiety had moved from whether the film was gay enough to whether it was too gay. The breathless coverage seemed to increase with every benchmark

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A Focus Features release © 2005 Focus Features. Photo: Kimberly French

Left: Director Ang Lee (left) and producer James Schamus

Below: Michelle Williams (left), Jake Gylenhaal (center), and Heath Ledger at the Toronto film festival screening

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that was passed. Watching the reports and opinion pieces mount up, I became convinced that the unprecedented coverage, in terms of both column inches and speculations, represented a form of heterosexual panic. The language of economics and market forces masked hysteria and homophobia.

While many on the conservative Right seemed inclined to try to ignore the phenomenon, there was considerable attention from its electronic bully pulpit, as the watchdog reports posted on the AfterElton.com website make clear:

> David Kupelian of WorldNetDaily.com wrote an article titled "The Rape of the Marlboro Man" and then appeared on FOX to share his opinion. Charles Kincaid, of Accuracy in Media, has managed to be even more homophobic. Even Larry King invited anti-gay pundits on his show to debate and criticize a movie they couldn't be bothered to see.
>
> FOX commentator Bill O'Reilly can scarcely imagine himself catching the movie, but if he did, he imagines that when the romantic scene in the pup tent occurs he will find himself wondering what would happen if the cowboys from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* were to stumble upon Jack and Ennis. Says O'Reilly, "Gunfire would be involved I imagine." MSNBC's Chris Matthew and radio personality Don Imus referred to *Brokeback* as *Fudgepack Mountain* among other derogatory comments they offered on-air.[4]

The relentlessness of the satires, parodies, and jokes indicated a classic and transparent use of humor to alleviate anxiety and offer symbolic protection. Mainstream media settled on a dominant response of ambivalent snickering. The cartoon "Boondocks" developed a running storyline concerning its homophobic grandfather's desire to see this "manly" Western, while jokes about *Brokeback Mountain* proliferated on talk shows. On the David Letterman show, for example, Nathan Lee corrected his host when Letterman referred to the film as "that gay cowboy movie," retorting: "Oh, it's so much more than that." But it was a set-up: the stage was transformed into the set of a *Brokeback Mountain* musical, Lee belted out double entendres, and dancing cowboys made a wink-wink mockery of the very idea of the film.

Jokes showed up repeatedly in op-ed pieces and newspaper columns. Larry David, in a New Year's Day

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The one-sheet poster

opinion piece, wrote that he was afraid to see *Brokeback Mountain*—because he might hear a little voice in his head saying: "Go ahead, admit it, they're cute. You can't fool me, gay man . . . Go ahead, stop fighting it! You're gay!"[5] This parodic stance in relation to the film reached its zenith in Jon Stewart's Academy Awards-show montage of gay western moments, still running on YouTube. In print, the montage was manifested as an endless series of articles that sought to alert readers that the Western had really always been gay—and, by extension, that this was therefore nothing new.[6]

Jokes most often took the form of a heterosexual man's reluctance to expose himself (so to speak) to on-screen homosexuality, a new-fangled revival of the old-fashioned contagion theory. MSNBC contributor Dave White kept his tongue firmly in cheek with an advice column entitled: "The straight dude's guide to Brokeback." Posing as a queer-eye-for-the-straight-guy movie critic and acknowledging the discomfort that heterosexual male readers might be experiencing at the prospect of seeing the film—a prospect that he assigned to coercion by their wives or girlfriends—White offered reassurance. It's a Western, he advised, plus you get to see Anne Hathaway topless, there's only one minute of kissing, and so on. White even appealed to a sense of fair play: "It's your turn. Really, it is, and you know it. Imagine how many thousands of hetero love stories gay people sit through in their lives. So you kind of owe us. Now get out there and watch those cowboys make out."[7]

Another tactic in the cultural mud-wrestling was the "chick flick" accusation, made with apparently no awareness of how sloppily it conflated homophobia with misogyny.[8] This tactic offered an exit strategy to heterosexual men trying to avoid going to the film on dates: they could simply say they never went to "chick flicks." Focus Features acknowledged that their strategy involved targeting a female audience with, for example, a poster that resembled the one used for *Titanic*.[9] Still, it's arguable that the label allowed pundits to dismiss the film without charges of homophobia. John Powers, writing in the *L.A. Weekly*, noticed the tenor of commentary, too, writing: "The most fascinating thing about Ang Lee's wrenching 'gay cowboy' picture (as it's lazily known) may well be the unlikely responses it's provoked . . . The media have been filled with pieces . . . either saying 'I don't want to see *Brokeback Mountain*' or asking whether the refusal to go makes you homophobic. I don't know about you, but I can't remember an op-ed piece about not wanting to see any other movie, or . . . anyone asking if skipping *Memoirs of a Geisha* means you're a racist. Gee, do you think gayness may still make some people uncomfortable?"[10]

Later, gay bloggers would rebuke the LGBT community for not responding forcefully to the parodies, if not as hate speech exactly then at least as a calculated campaign to "trivialize" the film. A major LGBT response was issued, though, to the television movie critic Gene Shalit. He reviewed the film on the *Today Show* and made reference to the way Jack, "who strikes me as a sexual predator, tracks Ennis down and coaxes him into sporadic trysts." Shalit's casual usage of the term "sexual predator"—historically leveled to demonize gay men—quickly brought the wrath of the media watchdog group GLAAD down upon him: a press release urged its readers to complain to NBC. This campaign, in turn, led to a rejoinder by Gene's son, Peter Shalit, whose statement was published in the *Advocate*. "I am a gay man, a physician, serving a mostly gay patient population in Seattle," he wrote. "I decided to contact you because . . . I am hurt by your mischaracterization of my father, a man who does not have a molecule of hate in his being." In particular, he criticized GLAAD for attacking his dad when so many real enemies lurked. "Incidentally, I loved the movie."[11]

Surveying the mainstream press, responses can be grouped according to the political position occupied by

each columnist, television commentator, or organization, as their responses to *Brokeback Mountain* slotted into the relevant categories of tolerance, antagonism, or ridicule. As the film began to move in larger and larger circles, there was an effort to conscript more and more voices into the debate. For a while, no celebrity, actor, or political figure was safe from the roll call. Catherine Deneuve was questioned by reporters at the Bangkok Film Festival, where she was receiving an award. She acknowledged her surprise at the film's success: "You wouldn't think that because of homophobia it could be popular," she said. Ever the diplomat with her public to consider, she quickly added: "But it's also one of the strengths of the American people that they are surprising."[12] Even President George W. Bush was asked his opinion during a question-and-answer session at Kansas State University and answered grimly that he hadn't seen it.[13] The fan who'd asked the question recommended he check it out. Soon enough, in a striking display of the film's viral mutations, Bush was cast opposite Cheney in a cartoon parody of *Brokeback Mountain* on the cover of the *New Yorker*, following the notorious Cheney shooting incident.

While *Brokeback Mountain's* cycle of mainstream attention ended after analysis of the Oscar results, the LGBT community's connection to the film has continued. During the film's initial run, writers had been overwhelmingly celebratory of the film. Marcus Hu, co-president of Strand Releasing, was one of the first gay voices in the industry to express unequivocal support, calling it a gay *Romeo and Juliet* in a column for the trade site, indieWIRE.com, written just prior to its release.[14] Just as mainstream critics were overwhelmingly positive, so were the LGBT press and blogosphere largely euphoric. It was "our *Gone With The Wind*" in some accounts.[15] Focus Features set up a "Share Your Story" feature on its website that brilliantly fused marketing and community service, shepherding gay autobiography and history under the *Brokeback Mountain* brand. There, thousands of anonymous writers told their stories. Among them are tales as heartbreaking as anything in the film: stories of isolation and abuse in rural America, tales of suicide and loss, marriage and denial, and finally escape (it was mainly those who got away who wrote in).

The gay website AfterElton.com started a *Brokeback Mountain* forum, ran lists of articles on the film with links, and linked to Dave Cullen's *Ultimate Brokeback Guide*, a dedicated website with multiple discussion threads on the film. Its articles and discussion sites are a convenient representative index of gay responses to the film: "Culture: How America and the world is reacting to Brokeback," "The Backlash Against the Brokeback Mountain Backlash," "Has American passed the Brokeback test?," "More Actors Willing to Play Gay for Pay," and so on.[16] At the time of writing, the "The Impact on Society & Ourselves" thread alone had 26,545 postings; the most recent post, written in mid-September 2006, was by a man announcing he had come out to his family with the help of the film and this online community. As the film escaped its status as a commodity to become a compass by which people fixed their own coordinates, it also escaped the expiration date common to films released into a generally unforgiving marketplace and achieved a shelf life of indeterminate longevity.

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A joke for some, a banner for others. And for still others, a target of criticism. Gay male viewers, in particular, had bones to pick with it. Some criticized the emphasis on emotion over sex, or contended it wasn't relevant to gay experience (shades of chick flicks again, this time meant to evoke the feminization of rugged homosexuality). Some, like Gary Indiana, questioned the legitimacy of the characters' attraction, arguing that while the isolationism of smalltown life was credible, what "seems less real, despite the months that separate each of Jack and Ennis's reunions, is the unfailing high voltage of their sexual connection. It's . . . rare for people to stay sexually interested in someone they love for much longer than two years."[17]

Other gay writers circled back to the original charge that Focus Features was going to de-fang the film and turn it heterosexual. In a notorious piece in the *New York Review of Books*, Daniel Mendelsohn argued exactly that. Even the press kit, he charged, had sought to conceal its central theme and to further the agenda of the advertising campaign tagline, "Love is a force of nature."[18] His central argument concerned the sense of a betrayal of queerness caused by a marketing of product based on a hypothetical universalism. In his answer, Schamus interestingly noted: "Mendelsohn is rightly nervous about what happens when a gay text is so widely and enthusiastically embraced by mainstream hetero-dominated culture; and it is true that many reviewers

contextualize their investment in the gay aspects of the romance by claiming that the characters' homosexuality is incidental to the film's achievements." Nervousness, again, this time making an appearance due to visibility, not invisibility.

But visibility on what terms? Here, finally is the heart of the *Brokeback Mountain* dilemma. On the one hand, a friend reports visiting his eighty-four-year-old mother in a Republican stronghold on Long Island and is thrilled to discover a DVD of the film in her den. On the other hand, sophisticated gay men in urban enclaves complain of conservatism and retrogression, a soppy package wrapped around an out-of-date stereotype. Is *Brokeback Mountain* merely the kind of gay-themed film that the marketplace can support? And is it, then, important to make or support such a product?

Certainly the gay fans of the film who placed a full-page ad in *Variety* after it failed to win the Academy Award for Best Picture thought so. Such an act was unprecedented in the trade journal's history and attested to the powerful loyalties the film had inspired by bringing its story out into the open of mainstream release.

Brokeback Mountain is an event movie, one that seeks with old-fashioned ambition to straddle marketplaces and move beyond self-identified audiences. That strategy is unlikely to appeal to all the LGBT communities prepared to cast judgment on any such gesture. Universalism, for good reason, is suspect by now. But what takes its place, then? Limited releases? Mutually exclusive niches? No-budget digital stories distributed by download? *Brokeback Mountain* was a mainstream release inspired by a widely read story by an established author, written by highly regarded screenwriters, directed by a name-brand heterosexual director. A post-identity-politics epic. And a hit. Whether that is a good or bad development, whether it's "good for the Jews" as my late parents used to say, will likely be decided in hindsight.

NOTES

1. A short list of thanks for speaking with me to: James Schamus as well as Harlan Gulko, Marcus Hu, John Murphy, Andrew Pulver, Marcus Hu, Stephen Raphael, John Murphy, Charles Wilmoth, and many others.
2. On this count, see my own original article, "Hello Cowboy," *Guardian*, 23 September 2005, http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1576188,00.html.
3. For details of that marketing strategy, see http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001956880.
4. See: http://www.afterelton.com/movies/2006/2/brokeback-test3.html.
5. Larry David, "Cowboys Are My Weakness," *New York Times*, 1 January 2006.
6. See David Thomson, "Who Are You Calling Butch?" *Independent* (U.K.), 13 September 2005, and a later piece on the decline of the Western by Alex Cox, "A Bullet in the Back," *Guardian*, 5 May 2006.
7. See Dave White, "The straight dude's guide to 'Brokeback,'" http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10342237 (posted on 8 December 2005).
8. See, for instance, *Newsweek*'s Susanna Schrobsdorff, "Chick Flick Cowboys: Brokeback Mountain Has Stolen the Hearts of Women in Middle America," http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10930877/site/newsweek, 20 January 2006. While young women have long been recognized as the primary audience for gay male films in Japan, the argument that American women would be the audience for a gay male film in the U.S. is a new phenomenon. It's tempting to see it, though, as a corollary to the traditional and notorious straight male audience for lesbian-themed sex movies, here substituting romance for the former porn focus.
9. See, for instance, Sean Smith, "Forbidden Territory," *Newsweek*, 21 November 2005, 68-70.
10. See John Powers, "Hollywood's Newest Age of Liberal Cinema," *LA Weekly*, 13 January 2006. Also Manohla Dargis, "Masculinity and Its Discontents in Marlboro Country," *New York Times*, 18 December 2005.
11. See http://www.advocate.com/news_detail_ektid24216.asp, posted 10 January 2006.
12. Agence France Press, 20 February 2006, Bangkok (web distribution, link no longer live).
13. See Peter Wallsten, "Bush on Brokeback, Didn't See, Can't Tell," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 January 2006.
14. See http://www.indiewire.com/movies/2005/12/first_person_ma.htm.
15. Personal communication, as quoted in "Hello Cowboy." Similar comparisons appeared in, among others, Anthony Kaufman, "Range Rovers: Subversive Western poses special challenge for Ang Lee and Focus," *Variety*, 26 October 2005.
16. See http://www.afterelton.com and http://www.davecullen.com/brokebackmountain.
17. See Gary Indiana, "West of Eden," *Village Voice*, 29 November 2005.
18. See Daniel Mendelsohn, "An Affair to Remember," *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 3, 23 February 2006 and the exchange of letters between Mendelsohn, Schamus, and Joel Connaroe in *New York Review of Books* 53, no. 6, 6 April 2006. See also Schamus's unpublished further letter, "Focus(ed) Debated", http://www.filmmakermagazine.com/blog/2006/03/focused-debated.php.

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ABSTRACT This essay explores the reception of *Brokeback Mountain* by film critics, gay viewers, female audiences, television shows, and the blogosphere. By tracing the path of controversies, jokes, and anxieties, this essay argues that hysteria came into play to mask homophobia while, in the gay community, debates etched the limits of contemporary identity politics.

KEYWORDS queer cinema, Brokeback, identity politics, audience, Ang Lee

■ D.A. MILLER

On the Universality of *Brokeback*

I

NON VOGLIO PIU SERVIR. Today's culture product comes to market shrink-wrapped in controversy. To arms, citizens! A culture war is being fought! And simultaneously, a *commedia dell'arte* is being performed, with the Liberal, the Christian, the Feminist, the Media Critic, all stepping onto the stage of public opinion in masks as familiarly defined as those of Pulchinello and Pantalone. In "The Battle of *Brokeback Mountain*," some of us have been asked to perform wearing the mask of the Gay Man, whose role in this comedy, of course, is as thoroughly prescripted as the others. He is to be the film's natural partisan, so innately identified with it that he must weep and cry homophobia when it doesn't win an Oscar. He is to believe the bad faith of its boosters, who pretend the film is "for" him, when it is merely "about" him and has been made entirely without his kind. He is to be all gratitude at seeing exposed, in 2005, the damage done by the Closet and—in the midst of a struggle to refuse the fatality of his condition—feel nothing but admiration for a nostalgically tragic view of it. And finally, as if so much servility to the master culture weren't enough, he is to forfeit his reputation for taste and mistake a middling piece of Hollywood product for a major work of art.

It is therefore worth insisting at the outset that, contrary to the playbill, we weren't *born* to play this part. In this phony war of ideas, queer intellectuals need to develop forms of what, in other wars, is called conscientious objection. There is something to learn from the morons who, when polled for their opinion on a universally burning issue, answer "none"; or from the philistines who, by way of ending the discussion of a universally admired film, pronounce it "boring." In fact, erotic disappointment may well be the only genuine homosexual response to *Brokeback Mountain*—and hence the only genuine basis for a political critique of the film. For in the spate of opinions that the film has been painstakingly designed to let loose, one attitude remains unsolicited and unprofessed: that of Desire. Here, right on cue, comes the Christian to thunder against sin and the Liberal to warble of love. And, over there, expected harangues from the Woman on the neglected wives, from the Gay Man on still-persisting homophobia, from the Film Critic on the Western or Ang Lee as auteur. But, notwithstanding the scene of two men fucking, no one has stepped forward to attest any *sexual* excitement in the film, whether around the film's actors, their bodies, or what these are represented as doing with one another. It is the idea of homosexuality that is hot in *Brokeback Mountain,* not the sex, which has been skillfully depicted, down to Heath Ledger's unforgivably harped-upon resemblance to George Bush, so that no one could possibly get off on it. What we are asked to "accept" about the Homosexual is not his sexuality, but his agonized attempts to fight it—touching proof of a certain devotion to normality after all.

The de-eroticization stems from the same principle of mainstream representation that, operating less subtly, eventually produces for our edification, along with other carrion, a couple of gay corpses. For even the Closet needs the stimulus of spectacle, be it only the spectacle of its own enforcement. In enlightened Hollywood, the decorums of this spectacle remain the same as in darkest Wyoming: homosexual desire is shown to best advantage in the condition of having passed on. Small wonder the film is "haunting." What thwarted love and gay-bashing spell out through plot, nostalgia and melancholy insinuate in the basso continuo of overall tone. As staged in the story, of course, the spectacle of the Closet is meant to stir its yuppie demographic to indignation: why can't these country gays have *Sex in the City*, too? But as staged in the storytelling, it is meant simply to be invisible.

II

TRIM LITTLE, PRIM LITTLE CRAFT. In its making and marketing alike, *Brokeback Mountain* invites the glib controversy that a homosexual theme still reliably generates in American culture. Far from bringing its public together in compassion or tolerance, as some have suggested, the film diligently solicits, in all their fractiousness, the main divisions of American opinion on

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Mountain

To designate the Homosexual here is at once to begin elaborating fantasies of his being harmed: "a gay is being beaten."

this "hot-button" issue. So cannily rotated is the homosexual theme that, under one aspect or another, it lends support to virtually all the conflicting positions, attitudes, and judgments that make it so thrillingly —and bankably—contentious. Accordingly, male homosexuality in *Brokeback Mountain* is massively contradictory: it is by turns, depending on which opinion is up for flattery, irresponsible and committed, casual and deeply felt, shocking and perfectly natural. In one scene, the Homosexual appears as the declared enemy of the family; but in another, he rises nobly to its defense; he hates women, of course—at least when he is not shown loving and caring for them; and though the film implicitly affirms his right to social recognition, it also dooms him, inexorably, to suffer more than social death. The program offers something for everyone to mouth off about.

In all the blah-blah, however, there is widespread accord on one point: this movie of cowboys in love is *well made. Christianity Today* is nearly blown away; it overrides its predictable reservations on the subject matter to award the film a generous three stars for "the quality of the filming, the acting, the cinematography, etc."[1] The *New York Review of Books*, with a warmer welcome for this subject matter, nonetheless concurs: the film's achievement consists in that its "distinctively gay story . . . happens to be so well told that any feeling person can be moved by it."[2] And from virtually everywhere in between on the spectrum of opinion (which in this sense is not all that broad) we hear of the film's extraordinary "beauty," its strong sense of "craft." As if by magic (or the operation of the unconscious), the art of *Brokeback Mountain* has turned every media apparatchik, usually busy summarizing plots and assessing star turns, into a Jamesian aesthete agog at the subtleties of artistic shaping. Even brutal sodomy only whets everybody's appreciation of the narrative and pictorial "mastery" with which this "raw" subject has been "exquisitely" composed.

It has not been, then, around an always-debatable homosexuality that the film (despite the good intentions professed on its behalf) builds a consensus, but around its own conspicuous craft. This craft is the real universal for which the film asks and is receiving general recognition. (The irony of the Academy Awards is that the film, after all, did get the prize it tried hardest to deserve: Best Direction.) In the critical reception, as in the film itself, the topic of homosexuality and the practice of craft work antithetically: the former, by its violent divisiveness, breaks up the social body as effectively as a centrifuge; whereas the latter unifies all that it touches—and everyone whom it touches—in the spectacle of fine workmanship. But they are complementary principles, too, since, especially now that the ideologization of culture has become total, respect for good form remains the best form of all. Such respect is not just an act of graciousness shown to our defeated adversary, like those statues of ancient royalty posed grandly in front of federal buildings in Hawaii. It is also an act of generosity to ourselves, as, by means of this gesture, we all get to look a little less tendentious: the Christian less rabid, the New York intellectual less shrill, the film itself less messagy. In "The Battle of *Brokeback Mountain*," craft is our Switzerland. In acknowledging the neutrality of this country, at once political sanctuary and psychic sanatorium, we lay claim to our whole, healed humanity—to the universality of "any feeling person"—which even in wartime is thus affirmed to have never deserted us. We are more, and better, than our often nasty positions in combat.

But what, exactly, does craft here consist in? Or rather, of all that it may be thought to consist in, under what particular aspect has it won such extraordinary homage? The answer is far from being immediately apparent, since what usually follows the stiff salute to craft is only a vague wave toward "the filming, the cinematography, the acting, etc." (To elaborate the quality of Rodrigo Prieto's cinematography, for instance, only a single predicate is ever offered: "beautiful.") But this reticence conveys its own message, one fully consonant with the intentions and practices of craft itself as an artistic ideology. For the exercise of craft requires not only a high degree of technical competence; it further

demands that the performance of such competence be accompanied—as by a coefficient that multiplies its value—by a rhetoric of discretion. Craft's golden rule: to keep quiet about itself—or as quiet, at any rate, as is compatible with its recognition *as* quiet. Accordingly, it offers a spectacle of the All-but-Invisible: the author seems virtually to have disappeared from a world that seems all the more solidly real for his absence; and his techniques, like his meanings, are barely detectable. (In this, craft is opposed to style, which, ostentatious and obtrusive, always seems to point, in the one direction, to a narcissistically indulged self and, in the other, to a factitious, unbelievable world.)

It is this rhetoric of discretion, rather than any specific technical achievement, that is celebrated in *Brokeback Mountain*. Lee is praised for "renouncing overt politics," for making his points "quietly," with "subtlety," "delicacy," "nuance," "taste," and even "heroic restraint." He is admirably "removed in his direction" and attentive to "the thought and emotions being articulated between the words and in the pauses." The point of this litany becomes plain when there is thrown into its midst, as part of the same approbation, the frequent observation that "there isn't much sex in the film." Not unlike that early enthusiast of Gide's *The Immoralist* who said, "If Michel freed himself, he would cease to interest me," critics essentially praise Lee for the prim repressiveness with which he handles the homosexual theme.[3] Craft has become a covert figure for the Closet itself: that well-made piece of cabinetry where homosexual desire, far from generating an overt politics, lives quietly with heroic restraint; and where nothing is more commonplace than words and feelings between the lines, unless it be the virtues—ever propitious to the artistic sense—of delicacy, taste, and nuance. Craft's discreet relation to meaning is here used to sublimate—conceal and idealize—the Closet's discreet relation to one meaning, *that meaning*, in particular. In a word, the craft of *Brokeback Mountain* is the Closet of the Closet.

III

LITTLE DOES HE KNOW. It is not, of course, the homosexual desire of Ennis del Mar that is put in this closet. No, his desire is (within craft's tactful limits) displayed for all to see. Indeed, we see it far better—and rather sooner—than Ennis himself, without the ignorance, confusion, and disavowal that distort his consciousness of it. "They believed themselves invisible," Annie Proulx writes of her gay cowboys in the well-made film's even-better-made source story, "not knowing Joe Aguirre had watched them through his 10x42 binoculars for ten minutes"[4]—and not knowing, either, that they're being scrutinized far more thoroughly by Proulx herself, from under the narration's cloak of invisibility. As a matter of fact, this cognitive edge over the Homosexual seems to lie at the very heart of her inspiration. Here is her account of how "Brokeback Mountain" began to take shape:

> One night in a bar upstate I had noticed an older ranch hand, maybe in his late sixties, obviously short on the world's luxury goods. Although spruced up for Friday night, his clothes were a little ragged, boots stained and worn. I had seen him around, working cows, helping with sheep, taking orders from a ranch manager. He was thin and lean, muscular in a stringy kind of way. He leaned against the back wall and his eyes were fastened not on the dozens of handsome and flashing women in the room but on the young cowboys playing pool. Maybe he was following the game, maybe he knew the players, maybe one was his son or nephew, but there was something in his expression, a kind of bitter longing, that made me wonder if he was country gay. Then I began to consider what it might have been like for him—not the real person against the wall, but for any ill-informed, confused, not-sure-of-what-he-was-feeling youth growing up in homophobic rural Wyoming. A few weeks later I listened to the vicious rant of an elderly bar-café owner who was incensed that two "homos" had come in the night before and ordered dinner. She said that if her bar regulars had been there (it was darts tournament night) things would have gone badly for them. "Brokeback" was constructed on the small but tight idea of a couple of home-grown country kids, opinions and self-knowledge shaped by the world around them, finding themselves in emotional waters of increasing depth. I wanted to develop the story through a kind of literary *sostenente*.[5]

Were we to come upon this passage in a novel, as part of a fictional first-person narration, we would immediately understand that there are not one, but two characters in the bar scene. One character, of course, is the *designated* one. This is the ranch hand who commands our attention as it is deftly led in stages from his shabby-genteel clothes, to his lean, muscular body, to his eyes fastened on the pool players, and finally—the *eureka* of character-formation—to that "something in his expression, a kind of bitter longing" that definitively suggests he is "country gay." The other character is the one we see *designating* him thus. This is the woman

who, by way of noticing that the man isn't looking at women, has placed him under such close watch. If she seems a freer spirit than he, that is because she has been spared the immobilizing techniques of her own observation. He is the character, she "merely" the narrator. The same process that reveals *his* body, age, work, social status, and desire denies equivalent knowledge about *her*, including, most relevantly, the motive for her sudden—and massive—psychic investment in him.

But in a novel, we would nonetheless wonder: what has brought the woman to this bar full of flashing women and desirable young men? How is *she* occupying its milieu? After all, she does not seem to be playing the social games of the place any more than the ranch hand. And why does she fix on him so intently? He has certainly not noticed her. What is she doing, what is she getting, in her observation of him—an observation that she wants nothing more than to prolong, as by a piano pedal, in a literary "*sostenente*"? Not all that obscurely, it is a complex of *desire* that structures her interest, desire not for "the real person against the wall"—from whom it will quickly detach itself for fresher meat—but for the super-exciting possibility of male homosexuality that, on the exiguous basis of "something in his expression," she eagerly, forcibly makes him personify. The knowing quality of her detection, like its unsurprising discovery, suggests that she has found only what she was seeking. "I had noticed": this epistemologist of the closet seems to have been on the cruise for a Homosexual well before she found one ("against the wall" indeed).

Whatever the passage makes us wonder about its narrator—without the rest of our novel, we can't with certainty say—its psychic mix of aggression, paranoia, and identification can hardly be reduced to an innocent reflex of liberal good will. That, though, is precisely the aim of the artistic "idea" as the passage eventually works it through: to replace the woman's complex desiring *relation* to male homosexuality with the free-standing *figure* of the Homosexual. This figure can then become the sole object of our interest, which, thus *dis*interested, can in turn bear a simpler, nobler name: sympathy.

He will need it. For to designate the Homosexual here is at once to begin elaborating fantasies of his being harmed: "a gay is being beaten." First, the woman envisions the damage that may have been inflicted on him in childhood, then, by way of someone else's "vicious rant," she foresees the danger he runs in adulthood when what is, in effect, *her* knowledge falls into the wrong hands (the café-owner's or her friends'). But this fantasy, of course, places her in an implicit dilemma: she must not tell what she knows, can never get her knowledge (or herself as its keeper) recognized. This is the dilemma that will be resolved in the ethically dignified form of a story. The couple originally formed by the woman and the country gay will morph into *two* country gays who love each other, hurt each other, are harmed by others. In the gays' now entirely "othered" drama, the woman will entirely disappear, and her implication in dreaming it will have dropped out of the picture—or better, will remain only as part of the enigmatic fascination of *their* picture. In this same memoir, Proulx notes that Jack and Ennis did something that, as a writer, she had never before experienced: "they began to get very damn real." And in the process the author can damn well forget *she made them up*.

In the finished story, the memoir's narratorial "I" has been replaced by the same anonymous, impersonal narration, with all its objectifying, "realistic" techniques, that Proulx's naturalist predecessors, absent gay cowboys, reserved for peasants, workers, and petty clerks. It has been replaced, in a word, with Literature—a Literature to which, barely able to read or write, Wyoming cowboys (like Maupassant's Norman peasants before them) have even less access than to self-consciousness. Harbored in this narration, armed with its devices, Proulx can say of the Homosexual as often as she pleases: "little did he know." And, objectified as her character, he is less than ever in a position to challenge her: "What the fuck are you looking at?"

IV

HORSEBACK MOUNTING. Proulx's self-disengagement models the protocol of liberal sympathy that is followed, with varying specifications, by all the men and women connected with the film adaptation. This protocol requires, first, that they establish the Homosexual in all his obvious libidinal difference; and then that they seek, somewhere outside that difference, a basis for "relating" to him understandingly. Having made the Homosexual a Martian, they may then congratulate themselves for finding in him their fellow man—or rather for trying to, as the effort must never be entirely persuasive. Heath Ledger, interviewed on his approach to the role of Ennis, affords an excellent example: "First of all, I had to go in and discover what was causing this inability to express and to love. What was the culprit in that? I figured that it was some sort of a battle, and the conclusion I came to was that he was battling himself and battling his genetic structure."[6] Ennis is a mystery; he requires nothing short of an expedition, as into unexplored parts, to "go in and discover" the obscure cause of which he is the effect. This cause, quasi-logically "figured" to a "conclusion," is his "genetic structure," a strategic synonym for homosexuality that surrounds

even the heart of darkness with a cordon sanitaire. It is now more unthinkable than ever that Ledger might have attempted to "go in and discover" his *own* repressed homosexual desire for help in playing the part. Yet once the assumption of his *external* relation to Ennis is in place, there commences the most extraordinary fantasy of the bond between them:

> The easiest thing I found [in playing the part] was being a ranch-hand, being a horse backup. I can ride backwards if I had to. I'm very comfortable with horses. I love horses and I have grown up around farm-hands and even if I was born in Perth, Western Australia, there's something very universal about anyone who's on horseback night and day. There's a universal trait. Even physically, when you are on horseback night and day, when you get off that horse, you are still walking as if there's still a horse between your legs.

It may well be doubted that the universal trait of *Brokeback Mountain* is horseback mounting; it is more likely to be the hilarity caused by this claim to that effect. But Ledger has a point, albeit an unconscious one. No Western has ever featured so many horses' asses as *Brokeback Mountain*, or so much male behavior that begged to be called horseplay. How long, Jack asks Ennis on a fishing trip, must they keep meeting like this? "Long as we can ride it" is the reply. Could the bit bear any more strain? If the critics' craft was code for the Closet, the actor's universal horseback mounting is an unwittingly lewd metaphor for the desire inside it.

Ledger's naivety about this desire ("Though I am not like Ennis in his 'genetic structure,' I *am* like him when I ride backwards or walk with a horse between my legs") may explain the curious abstractness of his performance. He has been praised, of course, for just the opposite, for concretizing Ennis's repressed unconscious in a veritable cornucopia of psychosomatisms. If we don't read repression in the actor's pursed lips, then we read it in his evasive eyes; and should we miss it there, his rounded posture or his mumbled diction is ready to expound. Overloaded with signage, though, this repression grows generic; it loses the specificity of an unconscious wish, of *that* unconscious wish. In the hectic competition of symptoms, no single one can seriously invite our imagination to drop below the waist. Any G-rated trauma might have done to account for the repression of this Ennis, who is merely superlatively uptight. (Here the performance chimes perfectly with Lee's auteurism, which projects a similarly broad-spectrum repression onto Jane Austen heroines, comic book heroes, Taiwanese families, Connecticut WASPS, and gay cowboys alike.)

While it is, of course, a classic mechanism of homosexual repression to displace and generalize itself in just such a way—think how many closet cases come off as asexual—Ledger's performance is governed by this mechanism, whose logic it obeys rather than lays bare. The overproduced signs of "the clenched" point us more to the actor's remarkable craft than to the character's restive ass. In admiring this craft, we reinforce Ledger's distance from Ennis, who has no more acting ability than, in a former life, he had Proulx's fluency in *style indirect libre*. The performance of repression continues repression's work. Just how thoroughly Ledger threw himself into this repression is suggested in the fact that, on the same set where he was playing at falling in love with Jake Gyllenhaal, he really did fall in love with Michelle Williams, reversing Ennis's swing from Alma to Jack with fastidious precision.

V

CRASH. Let me be clear as to what is bogus in the liberal attempt to "relate" to the Homosexual: it denies a relation to him *that already exists*. This is the libidinal, the fantasmatic relation to homosexual desire that no one in Western culture can escape in either narrowly psychic or broadly cultural forms. That is why, in the eyes of its homosexual objects, liberal sympathy will always fall short: for it takes care never to be so progressive that it goes back to the primary psychic relation it wishes to have severed. Ledger's remarks about the universality of horseback mounting are a particularly absurd case in point, but it ought to be no less preposterous to suggest, with certain associates of the production, that it was only by reaching deep into his Confucian upbringing, or in drawing heavily on his still-unfinished mourning for his late father, that Ang Lee managed to understand what his repressed gay lovers were going through.

It can never be anything but false to regard homosexual desire as the characteristic, the problem, the tragedy of *someone else*. It can never be anything but false even when it manifestly *is* this. That is because it is never *only* this. In every individual and in every collective, homosexual desire is a palpably internal affair; even through its institutionalized repression, it slips more often than there are frat initiations.[7] Moreover, what the Homosexual represents *as* homosexuality includes something *besides* homosexuality. If the Homosexual figures sexuality in its most exciting form (who does not recognize what Guy Hocquenghem called "the spontaneous sexualization of all relations with a homosexual"?), he also figures it, not unconnectedly, in its

most futile. Whether we have in mind an otherwise eligible bachelor or the repellent anus of his desire, the Homosexual is not only himself a great waste but also the agent of a still greater wasting. And what he, so to speak, lays to waste is nothing less than sexuality's social use value: its dependably productive submission to the yoke of conjugality and to the burden of the Child. That is why he is so terrifically exciting and why his represented fate is so regularly to die for us. Just as, in an automotive culture, the spectacle of cars being demolished generates equal parts elation and alarm, so, under the imperium of the Couple and the Child, the spectacle of an irresponsible *jouissance*—of sex desocialized—is as thrilling as it is threatening. What is consumed and condemned in this spectacle is not just a seductively homosexual desire, but also the seductively desocializing insistence of the sexual drive itself, whatever particular embodiments it may assume.[8]

Here is the contradiction under which *Brokeback Mountain* "happens to be" well crafted. On the one hand, homosexuality is only interesting (marketable) if it is the occasion for rehearsing a fantasy of the Homosexual as thrillingly, pointlessly antisocial, a *bête noire* who must die. On the other hand, this fantasy is neither compatible with, nor even tolerable to, the liberal politics of homosexuality as we know them and as *Brokeback Mountain* would espouse them. Thus the film must give us, along with this fantasy, a "progressive" alibi for indulging it; even while trading on the fantasy, it must tame it into appearing to authorize the formation of gay marrieds with children. The domestication follows two strategies. The first aims at reducing the sexual excitement, while the second deals with recycling the sexual waste. In keeping with the former, the film cultivates a quasi-clinical anhedonia around the male physique and drags outs what we must punningly call the *action* as distractingly as possible. Compliant with the latter, it takes care to ensure that the gay sex, even from its casual beginning, *signifies*—that is to say, signifies the socially redemptive values of "love" and "relationship" that alone can give gay sex meaning. Prieto's beautiful landscapes do double duty: their ready-to-wear ineffability at once suspends the plot and naturalizes its obvious functions. No sooner does Ennis join Jack in the tent, for instance, than the momentum of their erotic adventure is broken by an enormous full moon happening-to-be-gliding across a cloudy horizon. And by the operation of that *economy* which is one of the great wonders of craft, the same *Moonstruck* moon that holds up the action also puts a classic signifier of romance in front of it.

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Moonstruck moon

Of course, like good naturalist protagonists, the horny cowboys don't even see this moon, let alone understand what it means or appreciate the anti-narrative artistry of its appearance; only we do.

Of course, like good naturalist protagonists, the horny cowboys don't even see this moon, let alone understand what it means or appreciate the anti-narrative artistry of its appearance; only we do, from our obsessively indicated position of seeing more than they. I've already remarked how the naturalist techniques of Proulx's story extend her originating presumption that *the Homosexual doesn't see*—doesn't see himself and doesn't see us watching him. If, as Proulx herself allows, the film adaptation turns out to be "more powerful" than her story, this is because cinema—with its built-in voyeuristic split between spectators and spectacle—can make this presumption into virtual reality.

VI

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU LOOKING AT?" These are Ennis's words in the film; they are said to a man who happens to pass the alley where Ennis, having just separated from Jack, is violently throwing up. His question is effectual, shooing the man on despite his curiosity or concern. Why shouldn't it be? Ennis has resorted to a venerable catchword of gay-baiting, on hearing which every man knows enough to take his eyes elsewhere. Yet this efficacy evidently has its limits; *our* view of Ennis—who, rebus-like, is "spilling out his guts" to us—continues unaffected by anything except our now heightened appreciation of spectatorial privilege: to see without being seen. And the episode spells out for us what, in this film, that privilege specifically entails: namely, that even as others are debarred from inspecting the gay penetralium, *we get to keep looking.*

Medusa was supposed to turn whoever looked at her to stone; the Homosexual is felt to petrify his beholders differently, but no less.

That there is no "sex" in this episode merely permits us to sentimentalize in good conscience the sadism of our prurience. Ennis may have topped Jack in the pup tent; but here, alone with us, it is he, crouched and grunting, who seems to be fucked royally: back-broken under the burden of his own homosexuality and penetrated ungently by the superpower we enjoy while watching him squirm. We are, to modify Ennis's locution only slightly, *fucking-looking* at him; and better still, we never have to hear ourselves addressed by his question.

Like the Homosexual of classic psychoanalysis, Ennis is paranoid: "You ever get the feelin'—I don't know, when you're in town, and someone looks at you, suspicious, like he *knows*. Then you go out on the pavement and everyone's lookin' at you like they all know too." This paranoia has already produced its symptom in the scene where, deep in conversation with Jack, Ennis suddenly looks off into the horizon, sensing something; Jack instinctively follows his anxious eyes, as does the camera. But all we see is a passing pickup truck and a hawk casually flying above it; the driver looks straight at the road, and the hawk is a piece of local color, not an envoy from *The Birds*. All we see, in other words, is the empty structure of Ennis's paranoid seeing. Yet with only the slightest detachment from Hollywood's "cinema of comfort," we might also recognize here the pressure of our own seeing. Ennis *is* always being watched like a hawk—if not by Jack, or Joe Aguirre, or Alma, then, in a far more continuous surveillance than theirs combined, by us spectators. Though *Brokeback Mountain* does not otherwise seem to aspire to the cinematic avant-garde, there is something about Ledger's ever-"on" performance that almost suggests one of those postmodern shifts of narrative level in which a character behaves as though *he knows he is in the movie we are watching*. Only the fictive surveillance intrinsic to our spectatorial position, after all, allows us to diagnose the "paranoia" of Ennis's belief in the fictive surveillance that he imagines to know all about him. *We* are his paranoia; our very gaze holds—even as it holds back from him—the proof that he is what he can never be sure of being: in his right mind.

Yet spectatorial privilege does not in itself secure that distance which everyone is so eager to claim in watching the Homosexual. Where the Homosexual is concerned, it is precisely at the visual level that this distance is often felt to be most unsustainable. Medusa was supposed to turn whoever looked at her to stone; the Homosexual is felt to petrify his beholders differently, but no less. The very sight of him threatens to make men hard with his own kind of desire and to glaciate the women with the frigidity of his own indifference to them. And even if the men thus aroused become furious or the women thus scorned compulsively "warm" toward him, these are not dispassionate states of mind. It is as if eye contact absorbs from him the sexual equivalent of second-hand smoke, which causes even the abstinent to reek and sicken, to tingle and turn on, all at once. But *Brokeback Mountain* has no choice in the matter (to use that hoary trope of pornography): the story involves us in the perilously enjoyable occupation of queer-watching *by necessity*. How does the film interest us in this story, and make us lose interest, together? What, in other words, is the exact business of its celebrated craft?

I offer three linked shots as key to what the film has to tell us in this regard. The first shot shows Ennis as seen by Jack in the outside rear-view mirror of his truck; it concludes the ocular ballet of approach and avoidance, looking and looking away, that the two men perform while waiting outside Aguirre's trailer office. The second shot shows Joe Aguirre holding binoculars; he has been spying on what we have just observed ourselves with less trouble: a scene of Jack and Ennis, halfnaked, horsing around the campsite. And the third shot shows Alma looking through the window of a screen door and seeing a vehement kiss between Jack and Ennis that is continued over from the shot before it. In all three shots, the Homosexual—unambiguously "as such"—is shown being seen by another character through glass. The vitrification at once singles out the shots and joins them to one another in a series.[9]

Technically speaking, these three vitrified images all do the same thing: they render the preceding shot or sequence, given to us "objectively," into a "subjective" point of view. And (nothing quiet about the craft here) they do this with unapologetic virtuosity. To speak less technically, we also note that the omniscient narration always has the same content: a spectacle of erotic play between Jack and Ennis. The subjective shots interpose themselves in front of this spectacle like titles in a silent movie. Not only do they bring down the curtain on the spectacle, but they also give it a meaning that is, as it

THE HOMOSEXUAL OBSERVED: EROTIC PLAY UNDER GLASS

Jack is watching

Aguirre is watching

Alma is watching

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happens, no small part of the censorship.[10] Moving from objective to subjective seeing, we move from a homoerotic spectacle to a "view" or "take" on it, a strong, emotionally biased *position* that effectively replaces visual homoeroticism with narrative captioning. The first shot plainly bears the title "Jack is Amorous" and launches the gay love plot. No less legibly, the second shot—"Aguirre is Wrathful"—kicks off the homophobic counterplot. And with the third shot, almost screaming the message "Alma is Crushed," there is born the masterplot of the Family's destruction and ultimate reconstitution.

In this series of views, the film causes to precipitate, as out of a solution, not so much three characters, as three figures, three essences, which the drama will, like a good soap opera, set against one another in numerous permutations. First, the Homosexual (Jack, Ennis, Earl and Rich, the Mexican hustlers, Randall) who acknowledges that the homoerotic spectacle turns him on; then, the Homophobe (Aguirre, the Clown, Earl's killers, Lureen's father, Jack's killers, Jack's father), whose desire for this spectacle takes the form of a fury to annihilate it; and finally, the Woman (Alma, Lureen, Cassie, Jen and Alma Jr, Jack's mother) who reps the "family values" that the spectacle would exclude, unless —great liberal "hope"—there were found a way to domesticate it. X loves the thing through his narcissistic mirror; Y hates the thing, which his binoculars mean to keep at a distance; and Z, across the cruel, look-but-don't-touch transparency of the window pane, feels shut out by the thing. So the film's triangular dramatic structure already anticipates, even courts, what I have called the *commedia dell'arte* of its reception.

But, more important, these shots also work to put the spectator at a remove from the very triangle that they construct—to install us, at key moments of narrative expectancy, in a comfort zone *outside* the narrative. For to be told with so much "theater" that a shot represents an individual character's perspective is also to be told in the same emphasis that it does *not* represent our own. By paraded antithesis, these shots reaffirm our prior alignment with the perspectivally unowned omniscience. Because the characters' viewpoints are manifestly partial, limited to particular social, psychic, or narrative coordinates, our own seeing gets defined in the contrast as "universal." The watchers *in* these shots know more than those they watch, but the spectator *of* these shots knows more than the watchers; and no one is, or can ever be, watching us. Precisely insofar as their one-sided views (in the best Hegelian fashion) combine to generate the tragedy, they are prevented from wholly understanding it. By contrast, the objective narration with which we are thus pointedly identified never submits to the particularity of Jack's hunger, Aguirre's hate, Alma's hurt, or any equivalent deformation of itself. If it briefly *cites* these characters' perspectives, it is to negate them from its own always recoverable (because never actually surrendered) position above the fray.

With this consequence: that, whenever the Homosexual is seen as such, *it is not we who are seeing him.* Or to put it differently, we're not seeing him *that way*—with the cruising glance of the Homosexual, the murderous gaze of the Homophobe, the wounded look of the Woman. On the contrary, the film implicitly invites us to contradict each of these views thus: "but it doesn't quite *mean* what the character watching thinks!" Ennis doesn't *mean* his stance to be sexually provocative; and he and Jack don't *mean* to be fucking around the camp any more than they *mean* for their kiss to hurt Alma and the kids; in a word, *they don't mean to be homosexual.* The men are detached from the particular meaning that "perspective" imposes on them by the felt partiality of that same perspective.

Yet the dialectic of these shots does not move us beyond perspective so much as back to where we were before it, articulating in miniature the film's overall structure of nostalgia. At one end of each shot is a homosexual who doesn't mean to be homosexual, at the other end, matching and mirroring him, is a film spectator who doesn't mean for him to be either. Both parties are disallowed self-consciousness, the homosexual unable to attain it, the spectator freed from it by having its burden shifted to the dramatis personae. Accordingly, what is preserved in these shots is that *vague* homoeroticism, innocent and ineffable, that Jack and Ennis shared with us and the scenery on Brokeback Mountain. Even as the storyline is busy destroying the Homosexual, the visuals work to safeguard this homoeroticism, which, on condition that it remain unowned, unnamed and unmeaning, need answer to nobody.

Thus the film remains quite faithful to its genre, the Western, where this psychic preserve is more common than an Indian reservation, of which it occasionally takes the form. Finally, however, the ethos of *Brokeback Mountain* reminded me less of *The Searchers* (echoed for cinephiles in the last shot) than of *Bear Pond*, Bruce Weber's 1990 collection of male nudes. "Bear Pond" is a mythic summer place where unaffectedly naked men, alone or in twosomes, engage in outdoor activities as bucolic as its name. Here the homoerotic, though everywhere diffused, is never condensed into the Homosexual or the Gay; in the prevailing innocence of the place, lust or loathing would be as out of place as a woman. The world of "Bear Pond" has been beautifully, simply, *given*

Bruce Weber, *Jason and Christian on the island at Bear Pond,* in *Bear Pond* (1990).
© Bruce Weber

to us, the way a mountain landscape is given to sight, or the mountain air to respiration. The emergence of desire would be fatal to this fairyland, would drive it as far off as that El Dorado vainly sought by the cowboys, leathermen, and other assorted faux machos living in Chelsea or the Castro. Some of us used to think that *Bear Pond* was a regressive daydream peculiar to gay men: an Edenic fantasy of ourselves before the fall—the fall, I mean, not into forbidden sexual practices, but into the state of gay desire itself. Little did we know: in the world that produces and proscribes him, the wish to return the Homosexual to latency is universal.

NOTES

This essay came out of conversations about the film with Robert Beck, Matt Bell, Naifei Ding, Lee Edelman, Richard Hutson, Chris Jensen, David Kurnick, Joseph Litvak, Richard Peña, Kent Puckett, Enrico Vettore, J. Weiner, and Rob White.

1. Editor's note to review by Lisa Ann Cockrel, www.christianitytoday.com,16 December 2005.
2. Daniel Mendelson, "An Affair to Remember," *New York Review of Books*, 23 February 2006.
3. Cited in Michael Lucey, *Never Say I* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 84.
4. Annie Proulx, "Brokeback Mountain," in Proulx, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana, *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay* (New York: Scribner, 2006), 7.

5. Proulx, "Getting Movied," ibid., 129–30.
6. "Interview: Heath Ledger on 'Brokeback Mountain,'" conducted by Ethan Ames, *Cinema Confidential*, www.cinecon.com, 29 December 2005. The later quotation from Ledger is also from this interview.
7. Copycat crime? At the University of Vermont, Phi Gamma Delta recently "made its pledges wear cowboy outfits and endure a rain of antigay insults based on the recent movie *Brokeback Mountain*" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, News Blog, 10 May 2006).

   Another, more serious crime worthy of note here is the recent death of two men in Columbus, Ohio. I quote the beginning and end of the news report by Theodore Decker in the *Columbus Dispatch*, 12 January 2006:

   > **Murder-Suicide of Childhood Friends Baffles Relatives**
   >
   > They were childhood friends from Utah, riding in rodeos as teens and staying in touch as adults. Now, Columbus police and relatives are trying to sort out how such a close relationship could end in a murder-suicide . . .
   >
   > "I know that those two men were best friends," Michael Stone said. "They were friends all through high school. They rodeoed together.
   >
   > "There is absolutely nothing I know of either of these gentlemen that they would escalate into an argument or one of them shooting the other . . .
   >
   > "It's just so shocking that it is almost indescribable because those two were such good friends . . .
   >
   > "Hopefully, someday we'll be able to know exactly what happened."

   The article may or may not be alluding to *Brokeback Mountain*; and the puzzlement that it compulsively underscores may be disingenuous or merely unimaginative. We may no more resolve these ambiguities, which are typical of the Closet, than we can deny them.
8. To comprehend this spectacle and not just homophobically consume it, one might consult either of two sources. One is the great psychoanalytically minded tradition of queer theory running from Guy Hocquenghem (*Homosexual Desire*, 1972) through Leo Bersani (*Homos*, 1995) to Lee Edelman (*No Future*, 2004). The other is that film tradition one might call "homocinema," a sampling of whose major works would include Genet's *Chant d'Amour*, Fellini's *La dolce vita*, Pasolini's *Teorema* and *Salò,* Fassbinder's *Querelle*, Oshima's *Gohatto*, and most recently Almodóvar's *La mala educación.* Hollywood cinema knows only two options: to make homosexual desire invisible, in a closet intended for general use, or to make the Homosexual super-visible, as a minoritized "problem." In homocinema, what is uncloseted is not the Homosexual, but the nexus of desire, pleasure, and fantasy that normal culture develops around him. In the open circulation of these elements—in their emigration from the person and category of the Homosexual—homocinema finds a radical potential for disrupting social and symbolic order.
9. To underscore the series' coherence, each shot in it is given an echo: Jack, Aguirre, Alma, all resort to the mirror, the binoculars, the glass pane a second time.
10. Though Alma's observation does not literally end Ennis and Jack's kiss, it thoroughly drains the eros from its continuation. We may no longer enjoy the kiss, must entertain feelings quite contrary to pleasure. The film consistently practices this "aversion therapy," framing its homoerotic scenes, on one side or another, with images that throw a chill on them. The most gruesome instance comes when Ennis, rejoining the herd after his first night with Jack, finds a sheep's gutted carcass. A first shot gives us Ennis and the dead sheep together. A second shot shows us a close-up of Ennis looking and a third the sheep's mutilated carcass. A fourth shot makes as if to replicate this shot/countershot elaboration. We see Ennis look away, look back, but then—where the reverse shot of the dead sheep ought to be—we get a shot, in no way continuous with Ennis's sight line, of Jack naked, washing clothes by the stream. His fresh nudity has already been "spoiled," assimilated to the carrion it will become.

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ABSTRACT Critics of Ang Lee's gay-themed Western may or may not condone homosexuality, but they agree on one point: this movie of cowboys in love is *well made*. The essay unpacks what this perception implies about Lee's craft, as an art of reticence and a politics of neutrality.

KEYWORDS Ang Lee, *Brokeback Mountain*, Western, homosexuality, craft

■ JOSHUA CLOVER & CHRISTOPHER NEALON

Don't Ask, Don't Tell Me

ANG LEE HAS BEEN MAKING *Brokeback Mountain* (about an inexpressive guy who, fearfully bound by social convention, can't consummate his erotic/romantic life, leading to sorrow) since the Age of Innocence, refiguring it in genre after genre: Li Mu Bai, Bruce Banner, Ennis del Mar, sigh. That the latest conjuncture exceeded this formula to become culturally iconic may be indicative of the extent to which the gay love story was its ideal ground. What interests us, though, is how the film's iconic power leapt the cinematic frame almost instantly, lodging itself in posters, music, and short-form videos—a homecoming that one might indeed have predicted, insofar as it had already congealed in five incredibly gay minutes in 2001.

Brokeback Mountain was reputedly designed for the "fourth quadrant": older females. This suggests a lack of marketing models for queer audiences; it's also revealing about the film's genre status. Such ambiguity finds its purest expression in the brief scene of Jack Twist crying to an Emmylou Harris ballad: the neo-Western image of the pickup-driving cowboy must coexist in iconic space with the bereft lover from the woman's weepy.

This exemplifies the inescapable pull of the Ang Lee–James Schamus middlebrow melodrama on whatever genre it approaches (What will Ang Lee's pirates listen to? 'NPRrrr!) But there's more going on. Just as the Matthew Shepard story licenses the reality of the love story even as it ties the conclusive violence to the real world, the neo-Western underwrites *Brokeback Mountain*'s eclogue. Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) sets out the terms of what has become a genre of *inaction*: Bill Munny has closeted his gun and turned to slopping pigs. This isn't the set-up, the setting, or the desired end. It's the bulk of the film: a life of lacerating annoyance and boredom for Munny and us. The pastoral and the domestic—traditional values forming the two faces of "nature"—compose a lie repressing the immanent violence which, in the film's terms, is the true relation between men.

This Peckinpavian logic returns in *Brokeback Mountain* as a discomfitingly familiar trope, wherein queer love must be punished by fatal violence. In recompense, the film contrives a real sweetness: that, as the other desired/repressed, erotic love is also a true ground for relations between men.

Leveraging the modern Western toward this idea without finally being a Western, the film, unable to resolve its own ambiguities, pries apart the domestic and the pastoral—eventually to pit them against each other. Love between two men isn't simply natural, but Nature itself: as much as Annie Proulx's story resists landscape porn, the film's Brokeback Mountain, with its unpeopled long shots, holy infant sheep, and heroic horses, is an Eden-diorama. The domestic, in return, must bear the entire burden of false nature; against the alpine laboratory for the Late Hollywood Romance is contrasted the bovine world of women, adding machines, and squalling babies—which not only works at the expense of the very women to whom the film is targeted, but so meticulously landscapes the terrain of gay male pathos that the bodies in question have all too few paths to explore.

Part of *Brokeback Mountain*'s success is to have had its constricted yoking of melodrama and the modern Western read as realism: the film is hailed as an advance in the depiction of two men's love for each other because that love is seen as accurate to some gay men's experience. In particular, it's the supposedly traditional masculinity of Jack and Ennis—the jobs they do, how they carry their bodies—that allows this "realism" to be seen as progressive.

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Richard Prince (American, born 1949), *Untitled (cowboy)*, 1989
Chromogenic print; 127 x 177.8 cm (50 x 70 in.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Purchase, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation and Jennifer and Joseph Duke Gifts, 2000 (2000.272). © Richard Prince

But the film itself hedges against relying too much on gay-masculinity-as-realism both by cyclically returning point of view to the women in the film, and by draping a light scrim of comedy over Jack and Ennis's relationship. The moment when Michelle William's Alma sees her husband locking lips with his "fishing buddy" has achieved its own iconic status: Oprah Winfrey, when she hosted the cast for a pre-Academy Awards endorsement of the film's power, focused first on how hard it must have been for Heath and Jake to kiss each other—heavens!—but then insisted that the film was a lesson in the damage the closet wreaks on the lives of women who love closeted men.

In the world of *Brokeback Mountain*, meanwhile, neither Jack nor Ennis is seen as fully masculine: the movie makes it clear that sheepherding is an abject rung on the cowboy ladder. Jack is a failed rodeo cowboy, called a "piss-ant" in his wife's office by two clients who don't know he's her husband; Ennis is continually depicted as a klutz, tripping over gear in the high mountain campground and confusedly dropping into the season's first snow. Ledger moves his body to the score of physical comedy in these scenes, which form part of a small countercurrent of banter and irony in the film. It's this current, rather than baleful images of castrated gay men in ditches, that secures our sympathy for the two men, and establishes Jack's death as tragic.

But trumping the men's bodies with the landscape brings *Brokeback Mountain*, however sympathetic, into rough contact with the culture's sense of how to render male–male love. This isn't only true on the Right, where the idea is never to depict that love at all; but also out on the liberal cybernetic seas, where, almost immediately upon the release of the film, a flotilla of parodies arrived to rewrite the story in a comic mode.

The most famous of these parodies, which run Gustavo Santaolalla's score over montages from *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Top Gun* (1986), omit tragic death entirely to make two related points: first, that any Hollywood narrative can be made queer with a light nudge and some very cheap technology and, second, that gay-boy love stories can be built more quickly from iconic materials than from tragic ones.

Other parodies focus on stylizing or reworking key dialogue from the film ("It's nobody's business but ours"; "I wish I knew how to quit you"). These only

Bunny and the Jets: "Brokeback Bun-O-Vision" (by Jennifer Shiman) and "Top Gun 2: Brokeback Squadron"

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Trucker hat: the videos for "Man on the Moon" (top) and "Don't Tell Me"

serve to emphasize that it's iconicity, not tragedy, through which U.S. mass culture, at least, reads gay male sexuality. Even in re-stagings of the film that follow its whole plot arc—like Jennifer Shiman's thirty-second animated short, in which Jack and Ennis are played by two rabbits—the parody displaces tragedy by iconizing the leads and their dialogue. It's a lightning game: ten seconds after "I ain't queer / Me neither / [kiss]," Ennis-rabbit is clutching Jack-rabbit's shirt and racing through a "Jack, I swear." Love Comes Quickly, as the Pet Shop Boys once said.

The charm of this laptop *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth* derives in part from the fact that *it can be done.* The movie is iconizable in main because it relies on relatively few gestures: along with the catchphrases, the afterlife of the film reduces to the poster shot, a coat, a sentimental panorama, Ledger's telegraphic verbal taciturnity, the incessant acoustic guitar figure.

But the possibility is not the desire. These things, one might say, *had* to be broken free and turned loose as icons, to allow for a different range of feelings to flow out of (and back into) the movie, and to generate a palette of affect that the film denies itself. One might read the parodies as a willful blunting of the film's force; the experience of them suggests otherwise. One striking sensation on watching "Brokeback to the Future" is the way in which the rather thin wonderments of the Michael J. Fox vehicle read suddenly as glimmering thrills and delights for which the Ang Lee movie has been crying out.

As important as the film has been to a substantial audience, the implication of these iconic afterlives seems apparent: make the most of the moment. The audience the film calls on, in significant distinction from the average Hollywood queue, doesn't have the luxury of a prolix production stream; there's no point in waiting until next Friday for a queer comedy, a queer action flick or thriller. The endlessly-bruited wonder of *Brokeback Mountain* being made at all guarantees its reception as a singular event.

This can't help but read as a kind of advisory echoing a lifetime of ad campaigns: *If you're going to see only one gay love story this decade . . .* get as much expressive possibility out of it as you can, even if the film itself

resists such promiscuities. The lightness, wit, and sheer profligate opportunism of the parodist's re-use suggests both what's missing from the film—from pop-cultural space—and how missed it is.

In trying to grasp these "missing affects" and iconic ways of screening gay culture, we begin with the ways in which pop-cultural space itself is missing from *Brokeback Mountain*: to batten onto only one example, the utter absence of pop music (save a fleeting apparition, detached and unnameable, drifting from a Camaro late in the action). This seems worth remarking, in a film set in the United States between 1963 and 1983: from the arrival of the Beatles, that is, through the success of *Urban Cowboy* (1980) in shepherding cowboy music into the pop mainstream. More generally, this is the very period in which mass culture achieved an absolute quality itself verging on immanence (sometimes spelled M-T-V). It's as if pop music, mass culture, velocity, delight, the crudities of entertainment, and self-awareness had been forcibly exiled from Brokeback and plopped down on some other mountain, where one might expect to find some five-minute chunk that aggregated all these missing pieces into some Other Gay Cowboy Movie.

We are happy to say we have found the other mountain: it is Madonna's career. The Other Gay Cowboy Movie? The video for "Don't Tell Me" (2001), directed by Jean-Baptiste Mondino, the second single from her album *Music*. One of her best, it's also a kind of cowboy apotheosis of the aesthetic for which her discography argues.

Madonna begins where *Brokeback Mountain* ends, in 1983: one can imagine an inconceivably painful conclusion to the film with Ennis holding Jack's shirt and "Holiday" playing in the background. With that single, Madonna launched a sort of revolution in pop music against exactly the kind of depth that *Brokeback Mountain's* final scene attempts to convey by way of tragedy. Out from under the late-1970s weight of rock's baroque, out of the ashes of the (always homophobically announced) Death of Disco, Madonna's music came bearing unbearable lightness: "Holiday" was as shamelessly, wondrously flat as a Warhol. In retrospect it's as if the song knocked *Dark Side of The Moon* off every dorm-room turntable in the country with a single stroke.

Eighteen years and fifty-four singles later, the video for "Don't Tell Me" took that flatness as subject and possibility, breaking itself into a series of planes, each initially posing as "reality," that fold and collapse ceaselessly into each other. This is no miracle within the mise-en-abysmal history of the video form. What does seem finally miraculous is that, by compounding the planes and filling them with a certain set of highly mobile icons, the flatness returns as its opposite: not depth but possibility, allowing a range of motion and feeling that retains its shock and intensity after five years.

The agents of iconicity, as so often in Madonna's videos, are the singer and a band of male dancers. The icons, without much justification—the song itself lacks "Western" musical gestures—are drawn from the plains of the cowboy extravaganza, in a way designed explicitly to call up both iconicity and queerness.

Like Brokeback's motif, the song is based around a repeated guitar figure. But its off-kilter digicoustic loop, light-footed and depthless, is also everything missing from Santaolalla's tragic, organic pluck: the relation of the two guitar parts forms a holograph of the whole relation between video and movie. The video will develop by twinning the visual power of rodeo and dance, specifically two-step, putting particularly American masculinity into tension with physical pleasure (a tension with which pop music is enduringly familiar). But before this development, the video borrows *as icons* two images which anchor the argument and beg the question.

The first is that of Michael Stipe, pop star and gay man whose cowboy-hatted turn in the famous video

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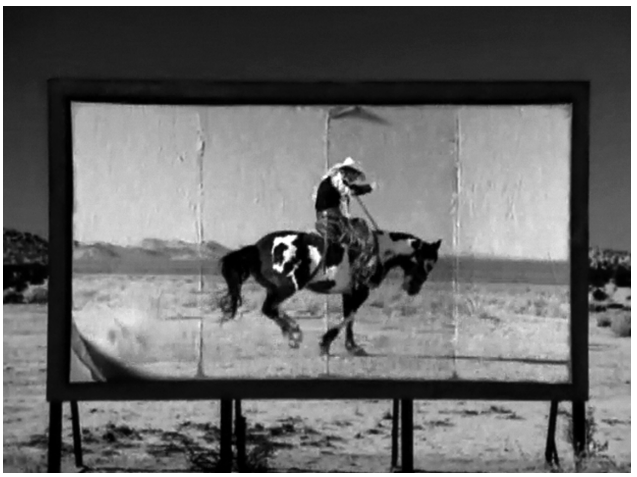

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Untitled cowboys: *Brokeback Mountain* and "Don't Tell Me"

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"Don't Tell Me": The Other Gay Cowboys

for "Man on the Moon" (1992), directed by Peter Care, is recapitulated in "Don't Tell Me," pared down to the first twelve seconds. The second shared icon is a Richard Prince print from 1989, *Untitled (cowboy)*, once the most expensive photograph in history, which the video animates on a billboard: the first of what will turn out to be a whole troupe of ridin', dancin' cowboys. This is perhaps the most immediate point of contact with *Brokeback Mountain*; Ang Lee reanimates the image for his own purposes, immediately after Ennis and Jack's first coupling.

Brokeback Mountain sutures Prince's iconic cowboy so seamlessly into a realist narrative that it's easy to miss; in "Don't Tell Me," the image grounds a dizzy set of relays between Madonna and her dancers that never settle in any one plane of reality. It's formal gaming: even as the wind from a passing truck blows Madonna's hat off screen at the opening shot's end, a zoom back reveals her striding a sound-stage treadmill, the truck and highway artifacts of a video screen. That's the mundane version: the video suggests that Madonna occupies a space in which the virtual continually becomes and un-becomes "real."

Screens on top of screens: on another indeterminately real desert billboard, we are introduced to four cowboy dancers, singly and then all together, who kick up sand and swivel their hips in a complete ignorance of each other that gradually becomes a synchrony. Madonna, off-road, meanwhile kicks up her own dust against a mountain background thrice distorted: by flash frames, a focal length tromboning to the song's beat, and process-accelerated clouds traversing a sky racing from day to night and back again. If it's Brokeback Mountain in the distance, Jack and Ennis are living their summer every few minutes.

This mountain, though, has what *Brokeback Mountain* disallowed: a weather goddess (and non-suffering female) who ignites instead of dampening a gay male sexuality. As soon as the video places Madonna and the dancers on their own planes, it begins to bring them together. Or, the video suggests, Madonna does this herself, writhing onanistically in a kind of invocation that coordinates the cowboys both with each other and with her: in the next shot, the cowboys have become a tightly choreographed background troupe, mimicking Madonna's every move—though they are still one screen behind her.

This is all exhilarating enough; it's just prelude to the moment, 150 seconds in, where the cowboys depart their own aestheticized flatness for the singer's. All of them, now in black, clomp on suddenly diegetic floorboards, thumbs in beltloops, hats in hands, first sideways, then right at the viewer, staring us down in close up like a posse riding into town.

What's not to love? It's not simply that dancing, pop music, the harmonizing pleasures of choreography allow ecstasies the full movie refuses. It's that these things can arise out of more or less the same set of icons, of starting points, from which the film's tragedy departs: Western frontier masculinity, meditative land-

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Lonely triptych: "Don't Tell Me" and *Brokeback Mountain*

scape, queer desire, a plucked guitar. And yet, the difference can't be reduced to mere choice—as if *Brokeback Mountain* could have accessed all this, had only one of the film's various cowgirls succeeded in persuading Ennis to dance. Instead, its conclusion is encoded in its form.

Our argument is thus twofold: first, that tragedy is not the inevitable result of gathering these icons together and turning them loose (and that suggesting as much is very hard to read as progressive). Second, that tragedy may be the consequence of misrecognizing iconicity as depth. The layered flatnesses of "Don't Tell Me" comprise a structure of feeling; the feelings themselves come from the mobility of iconic figures between the layers. Thus the *Brokeback Mountain* parodies, for example, can be read as an attempt to feel more, feel differently, exactly by rescuing the icons from their realistic, humanistic depth and returning them to the flatness in which, ironically, they can enjoy greater freedom.

This freedom has musical, iconic, and implicitly narrative content. No sooner have Madonna and her troupe come stomping toward us, deadly seriously and having almost too much fun, then the video shifts into another register for its final minute—a meditative shift linked, in the song, to its high, plaintive string arrangement, and in the image-stream to scenes of the anonymous Richard Prince cowboy, whose fluid movements atop his horse point to some Nirvana even brilliant two-step only aims at. The strings (absent vocals) and the cowboy (without Madonna) form the final sound image of the video, the unnamed rider thrown from his horse in slow motion, helically winding his torso to watch it ride away. In one last miracle, this ecstatic rhinestone stylization has made a space for genuine Western loneliness.

We're trying to tell a story about stories: about how, across genres and media, the frontiers of images and narratives get traversed. It's as though *Brokeback Mountain* serves, not so much as a tragedy on its own terms, but as a tragic instance of the limits of tragedy for queer storytelling—at least that tragedy insisting on the realism of inexpressive bodies and overwhelming landscape. The film has real emotional power; for us it's the power of having exhausted itself exactly such that it enabled the surrounding culture to reach through it, past it. The parodies, mocking up other narratives with the movie's iconic fragments, are laden with the urgency of this reach. "Don't Tell Me," for us, congeals exactly those popular desires to handle and distort icons until they produce feelings no calculus of realism could predict. It's for the fifth quadrant: the audience that cannot yet really be named, still in sync'd and graceful mid-reach under swiftly moving, darkening skies.

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ABSTRACT *Brokeback Mountain* insists on tragic realism. But Internet parodies of the film rework it to stage other emotions. And a 2001 Madonna video develops similar materials into a cowboy loneliness born of the ecstasy *Brokeback Mountain* forbids itself.

KEYWORDS *Brokeback Mountain*, tragedy, iconicity, Internet parody, Madonna

■ ANN MARIE STOCK

IMAGINING THE FUTURE IN REVOLUTIONARY CUBA
An Interview with Fernando Pérez

Courtesy of ICAIC

Fernando Pérez directs one of the child actresses in *Life is to Whistle*

You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one

—*John Lennon*

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FERNANDO PÉREZ WAS NAMED filmmaker of the decade in Cuba at the close of the 1990s. He has captured poignantly and poetically on film Cuba's dramatic transformation when the island nation plummeted into a full-scale crisis. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union during the late 1980s and early 1990s, severe shortages affected virtually every aspect of life for Cubans: frequent blackouts left families without electricity for long periods; food shortages resulted in widespread hunger and undernourishment; basic products once plentiful—soap, light bulbs, paper—disappeared altogether; and the lack of fuel paralyzed private autos and dramatically reduced the public transportation upon which most islanders relied. Scores of frustrated Cubans constructed makeshift rafts and drifted away from the island. Those who remained had to struggle—not only to make ends meet but also to reckon with the nation's uncertain future.

Pérez chronicled this time of accelerated change, a "Special Period" during which Cubans re-examined their relationship to one another, to the state, and to individuals and institutions beyond the island. He documented the nation's transformation and, without reiterating tired rhetoric or relying on outmoded dichotomies, proffered a vision of Cuba's future. It is a vision that acknowledges the revolution's accomplishments while recognizing current challenges. It is a vision predicated on solidarity, on communication, and on acceptance of one another despite the fact that "nobody's perfect." It is, above all, a guardedly hopeful vision that reaffirms the power of the human spirit and the possibility of a better future.

This filmmaker's career parallels that of many of his contemporaries. Fernando Pérez has worked in Cuba's state-sponsored film institute, ICAIC (Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry), for more than forty years. With no formal training in filmmaking, he learned his craft from more experienced directors including Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Julio García Espinosa, Santiago Álvarez, and others; his first tasks with ICAIC were translating and assisting other filmmakers and producing newsreels and documentaries. Only after more than two decades did he begin making feature films. *The Clandestine Ones*, made in 1987, depicts a group of young people fighting against the Batista dictatorship. *Hello Hemingway*, completed four years later in 1991, interweaves the struggle of Hemingway's old fisherman with the challenges faced by a young woman, just outside Havana, coming of age. Both of these works are set in 1950s Cuba before the "triumph" of the Revolution, and both narrate events of that time through personal experiences rather than epic histories. Apparent from these early feature films by Pérez were the qualities that would continue resonating with viewers at home and abroad: the filmmaker's honest portrayal of Cuba's quotidian reality and his willingness to infuse personal experiences—including his own—into his artistic expression.

Perez's next three films shift their focus from the late 1950s to the present, and move away from traditional narrative structures into more experiential terrain. The first of these, *Madagascar* (1994), was made against all odds, during a time when Cuba's state-sponsored film institute was experiencing shortages of virgin film stock, fuel to transport crews and equipment, food to provide a meal to those working long days, and the hard currency necessary to edit, produce and distribute films. This film underscores the constant transition and need to reckon with the past, the impossibility of locating oneself, and the importance of solidarity in uncertain times. Three female protagonists —grandmother, mother, and daughter—repeatedly pack up their belongings and move from one dwelling to another. Crated furniture, piled boxes, squeaking pulleys and empty rooms underline this perpetual dislocation. So, too, do the images of cyclists who are sometimes pedaling and sometimes pushing their bicycles, but always in motion. A double ending contributes to the film's guardedly hopeful vision—one sequence shows mother and daughter leading their bicycles into a dark tunnel, and another depicts a slow-moving train to the crescendo of Omara Portuondo's voice singing a popular Cuban love song. The film's hopeful message during hard times buoyed up Cuban audiences. At the premiere of *Madagascar* during the International Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, viewers left the cinema not in silence but in song. Their voices joined together in singing the tender love song. As a member of that audience, I shared the filmmaker's hopeful vision: the Cuban spirit would undoubtedly prevail.

Life is to Whistle (1998) explores the power of dreams and desires in shaping the future. The film centers around three Havana residents who share the experience of having been orphaned. All have made promises that impede them from achieving happiness in the present and finding hope for the future. Julia, a nursing home attendant, is undergoing therapy because she faints every time she hears the taboo word "sex"; Elpidio cannot reciprocate the tender feelings of a foreign marine biologist because he's obsessed with his estranged mother, allegorically named Cuba; and Mariana struggles to balance her physical desires with her artistic commitment to ballet. From her place in the

Courtesy of ICAIC

Larita (Laura de la Uz) stands on the edge of the island, looking off to sea, in *Madagascar*

future, Bebé (played by the filmmaker's daughter), narrates these intersecting stories. She alters the protagonists' destinies, revealing to them—and to viewers—the secret to finding happiness. Set to the music of Bola de Nieve and Benny Moré, the film fuses the reality of end-of-the-twentieth-century Havana with the dreams and desires of its inhabitants. It suggests that the past, although imperfect, can help shape the future. Once again, the belief in the human spirit and the message of solidarity prevail.

This film, like *Madagascar* before it, managed to appeal to Cubans as well as to viewers around the world. At the Sundance Festival in 1999, the Latin American Jury lauded *Life is to Whistle* for "bridging the past and the present, politics and poetry, and home and the world, and for breathing life into the soul of independent filmmaking." The Miami International Film Festival organizers selected this film for their annual event, making Pérez's film the first from revolutionary Cuba to be screened at this south Florida festival.

Havana Suite (2003) emerged from a different set of challenges, those confronting Cubans whose experience of "home" was becoming increasingly connected to the international sphere. As a survival strategy, the nation sought capital through tourism and joint ventures, developed its communications networks, and embraced new technologies. (Pérez's mode of filmmaking embodies these changes; with *Havana Suite* he relied on funding from Spain's Wanda Visions, and ventured for the first time into digital media.) Despite the reimagining of notions of "home," or perhaps because of it, this film transmits Perez's love of his native Havana. Beams from El Morro lighthouse illuminate the Bay of Havana. These sequences mark the beginning and end of one day in the life of this city, and of the film. With fondness and respect, the camera follows several individuals as they go about the business of living in the nation's capital. Despite the constant challenges, they somehow manage to hold fast to their dreams. (Only the elderly peanut vendor has outlived hers; she dreams no more.) What results is an exceedingly moving portrait of the city through the experiences of a handful of its inhabitants.

This work is eminently poetic with its aesthetic sensibility created through rhythm and silence. Images have been carefully selected and painstakingly edited. Amid the street scenes, the camera singles out select words: the sign outside the bookstore invoking "Modern Poetry," the cinema marquee calling attention to "Revolution," and the airline logos conjuring "Continental" and "Cubana." The soundtrack is spare, particularly where dialogue is concerned. Rather than talking heads or conversations, it is strains of music, silence, and street noises—jackhammers pounding pavement, automobile horns blaring, and airplane motors whirring—that accompany the images. Unifying the distinct vignettes are sequences depicting a statue of John Lennon; this bronze tribute located in Havana's Lenin Park evokes present-day Cuba while embracing dreamers everywhere who imagine the world living as one. *Havana Suite,* like Perez's earlier films, resonates for audiences at home and around the world.

This interview has grown out of conversations and correspondence during the past fifteen years, as well as interviews in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1996 and Havana in 2003.[1]

ANN MARIE STOCK: *Your first two feature films,* The Clandestine Ones *and* Hello Hemingway*, develop along traditional narrative lines. How did you move to* Madagascar*, a work very much rooted in its moment of creation and much more experimental than your earlier feature films?*

FERNANDO PÉREZ: By the early 1990s I felt the need—one that had grown stronger over time—to address my present, my context. But I didn't want to do it in a journalistic way, nor did I want to make another film denouncing the situation in Cuba with the long lines, bureaucracy, problems of everyday life. This had already been done—on film, in the press, and all around. It seemed important to me to move beyond the level of journalistic reporting, to develop this contemporary theme through interiority, the subjectivity of a person.

With *Madagascar* I felt the need to do something different. The idea for this film had occurred to me in the early 1980s. I read a story called "The Beatles versus

Duran Duran" by Mirta Yáñez, a Cuban writer of my generation. What struck me in the story at that time was the conflict between generations—how this generation gap revealed itself in Cuba, in Cuban reality. I especially liked one part at the beginning, the story of a university professor who has a perfect life except for one problem—when she sleeps, she dreams of the quotidian reality she's just lived, so night and day merge until she can't distinguish her dreams from her lived experiences. Upon rereading the story, it became clear that the sources of conflict between generations in the 1980s differed from those of the 1990s. I knew I'd have to make major changes. And I did. But the story influenced the initial sequence.

I think it also coincided with a moment of flux in my relationships with my children. During this time, they looked at reality in one way, and I saw it in another. These contradictions affected me and I became obsessed with this issue. So I saw the possibility of drawing upon my subjective vision to think about human communication—that is, human communication located in present-day Cuba, in our reality. This was the spark for the story I wanted to tell.

Is that why you ended Madagascar *as you did, why you didn't leave the women—and the viewers—in the dark tunnel?*

Exactly. Rather than ending with the mother and daughter entering a dark tunnel, I added a sequence of a moving train, an image I had of an endless train in constant motion—moving very slowly, but moving steadily—to a song that is pure feeling. The traditional Cuban song "Quiéreme mucho" ["Yours"] insists that love lasts despite separation. I believe that in present-day Cuba there is a great deal to love, and also a lot that can still be improved—slowly, but steadily.

Madagascar *is one of the few films made during Cuba's Special Period. How were you able to manage this during such a difficult time?*

It was the summer of 1993, a time referred to as Operation Zero in Cuba—that is, the lowest point during the Special Period. Amid these difficulties, I filmed thinking this could be the last film I'd ever make—that at any time the country could be paralyzed and I'd be unable to finish. But I confess that I filmed under the best possible conditions, with everything one could aspire to have. This was a great privilege, and I'm aware of that. In any other country, within any other system experiencing economic conditions like those in Cuba at that time, no one could have made a film. And we were able to film with no pressures at all—none other than those we imposed on ourselves in order to accomplish our goals.

Your mention of the pressure reminds me of a statement made by one of your mentors, Titón [Tomás Gutiérrez Alea]. When asked by a U.S. university student why he hadn't ever filmed in Hollywood, he replied, "It's not that I haven't been invited to do so. I'm just not sure I'd have the same liberty in Hollywood that I have in Cuba to make the films I want to make." What do you think of this?

Titón's answer strikes me as extraordinary, because that's the way it is. Let's talk about pressures. Going back to *Madagascar*, the only one who applied pressure with that film was me. Why? Because I felt that many Cuban cineastes could fall in the trap of making excuses, saying, "Look, we don't have the right conditions at this time. It's too difficult to make a film." Life in Cuba was, in fact, becoming very difficult. We were living on the edge. And ICAIC was in transition, too, with a change in leadership and uncertainty as to the process through which new projects would be approved. We knew that only one or two films per year could be made . . . I said to Rolando [Díaz] and Daniel [Díaz Torres], "We have to have scripts ready. No matter what, we have to have them." And we spoke with the director of production, Camilo Vives, and he said that if we could get him the scripts by June 19th, we'd have the opportunity to begin filming. Other filmmakers thought I was wasting my time—what with the economic crisis and Option Zero and the ICAIC offices about to close for summer holidays. I didn't focus on all of these problems but instead on the problem of getting my script written. And I didn't turn it in on the 19th—but on the 17th. Once I had submitted it, I then pushed to get it read and approved. So the pressure I felt on my project was the pressure I applied.

Whereas your early films were financed solely by the Cuban film institute, your more recent films have been coproductions. Has this transnational mode affected your creative process and that of your colleagues?

Initially I was very biased against coproductions, but with Wanda Visión I have found a coproducer interested in much more than business. José María Morales is a creative coproducer who wants to make a different kind of cinema. And as far as I know, my colleagues haven't felt pressured by other coproducers. I feel that Juan Carlos Tabío, Daniel Díaz Torres, Orlando Rojas, and other filmmakers have made the type of films they've wanted to make. Some of them have aimed to address the masses using comedy, a tradition in Cuban cinema and Cuban culture in general. Naturally the

works have been of varying quality, but I don't feel that a certain cinema has been imposed upon them.

One reviewer described Madagascar *as "an extraordinary meditation on the lost promise of youth and revolution." Would you comment on the promise of youth and revolution in present-day Cuba?*
I think many young Cubans have lost their illusions. It's true. And perhaps for them ideology, once converted to doctrine and reiterated, has lost its meaning. That is to say perhaps they need a different spirit, something not quite so established as the ideology of the revolution, the ideas of the revolution.

I believe that at present there are many lost illusions in Cuba. When I think of Cuba of the 1990s, I remember being shocked each time I returned from a trip outside my country, shocked to observe some social phenomenon that hadn't existed before. We had experienced problems of scarcity, bureaucracy, structure, disorganization, and so on, but never such serious social problems as those experienced during the Special Period. The economic crisis generated a crisis of values. Before, you didn't see such blatant expressions of prostitution, of hustling . . . In the Special Period, you began to see children asking for soap or a piece of gum. The quality of life deteriorated, and material decline can provoke a spiritual decline. I think the spirits of many in Cuba have deteriorated. You have to have a strong spirit to put up with the kinds of challenges we've been facing. But I do think there are strong spirits in Cuba. Why? Because people have lived many illusions and seen them become reality; they have influenced their destinies. Getting back to the film, while I believe there should be space for depicting lost promises, I don't see *Madagascar* as being about that.

We're living a difficult moment, but I believe we're going to come out of it. There's going to be a way out. Where will we end up? I don't know. When will this happen? I don't know. What will it be like? I don't know. But I do believe that there will be a way out. A way out in which the best accomplishments of the revolution will be retained, and the problems that haven't yet been resolved will be approached in a different way . . .

Does your hope—your belief in the human spirit and in the possibility of transformation—hark back to the 1960s and to your formation as a filmmaker during that time?
The generation of the 1960s—and here I'm referring not only to Cuba at that time but to the larger generation around the world—was a generation that struggled, dreamed, had illusions, resisted the war in Vietnam, carried out the revolts in Europe . . . It was the generation of the hippies in the U.S., of The Beatles—a generation with a new kind of music, a sense of liberty and justice, a desire to create a new society. It was the time of Ché [Guevara] in Bolivia . . . It was a generation of ideas—and I believe this is the most important part—a generation committed to transformation. This had an impact on the entire world.

I feel I owe a great deal to the collective cinematographic experience of ICAIC. I belong to ICAIC, to the ICAIC that was founded in March 1959, to the ICAIC that has changed, and I think that it's a cinema institution that has meant a lot for Cuban culture because of its design, programs, perspectives, and the mentality created there for the artists. And that was something that has its origins in its founders and well . . . filmmakers like Alfredo Guevara (because I consider him a filmmaker), Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Julio García Espinosa, and so many others. They inspired in us a way of thinking, a way of approaching cinema that was for me the best possible school. I am also indebted to the University of Havana. There was no film school here when I was young in the 1960s, so I studied culture in order to become a filmmaker. In the fine arts program at the University of Havana I had professors with great minds, thinkers who always had a complex vision of the world, never a schematic one. They taught me that what is most beautiful is that which is most complex. Life is not simple. Life moves based on contradictions and we human beings are complex, as complex as the diversity that pulls us apart but also joins us together. I think that was a way of preparing us to feel, to share, to look at life. And I look at life that way and try to reflect it in the films I make.

The spirit of the 1960s doesn't exist right now, but I think it will return. It will come back. I don't know how or when, but as long as there are people in the world who think independently—who have ideas—this spirit will exist. It's just that right now these ideas aren't the predominant ones . . .

Your next film, Life is to Whistle, *also had a profound impact on viewers. One Cuban critic structured his review as a letter, thanking you for the film's curative powers. How do you manage to evoke such powerful reactions?*
I don't know . . . I think you have to be prepared to find the meaning of life. I'm a person who thinks life is worth living; it's full of pain, too, but that's part of living it. And one should always—at least I try to do it—be in harmony with reality. I have moments of hesitation, of anguish, but I always try to find harmony, and always look for the value of the little things. Not by chance in *Life is to Whistle,* a film that deals with all

these considerations on a metaphoric symbolic level, I put in Ho Chi Min's thought. He believed that "Never is dawn closer than when night is at its darkest." I always live like that, thinking that life can get very complicated at times, but doors can suddenly open, too. That has always happened to me. And I think that if you wait for that, if you prepare for that, it happens. If you get negative, then negativity will prevail.

I also believe in the mystery of life. There are many things I can't explain to myself. Sometimes I look at the sky full of stars and wonder, "What am I in relation to all of that? What lies beyond that universe?" And I think, well, we're dust from the stars and then I start dreaming and thinking about things, and the problems become relative . . . Trusting people . . . I trust people a lot and I also trust myself and I trust the good side of life. And I know that sometimes I find what I'm looking for, it comes to me ... And sometimes I don't find what I'm looking for, but that's no reason to despair. Right? And I think that's why I try to be sincere in the films I make and to play with all these feelings, to transmit them to the audience. I like to share with the audience these feelings and experiences.

After four successful features, you returned to documentary filmmaking. How did this shift come about?

Havana Suite was a made-to-order film. I hadn't planned on filming a documentary about Havana, because I confess that a documentary is much harder for me to make than a fiction film. So when I was asked to work on this project late in 2001 by the Spanish producer José María Morales, I hesitated. I was kind of unprepared to make a fifty-five-minute documentary on video for European television. I had in mind the scripts for *Madrigal* and *Loving Gilda* and they were my two obsessions. So when he proposed the project I thought, "A documentary? Now?" but then said, "Well, it *is* about Havana." I thought about it and finally accepted, but wondered what kind of documentary I would make. I wanted to make something that really motivated me, something where I felt I was leaving a part of me in what I was doing, because that is the cinema I like to work on and have done thus far and hope to continue doing. I decided against doing a documentary with interviews. I rejected some of the well-trodden paths—not out of eagerness for originality, but rather to explore the possibilities of the cinematographic language . . . to search for new routes in order to prove, even to myself as a filmmaker, how far one can or cannot move along them.

MADRIGAL: PÉREZ CONTINUES TO PUSH THE LIMITS

As this essay was going to press, Fernando Pérez was just completing his new film. I screened the rough cut of *Madrigal* with the director in Havana in June 2006. Despite the filmmaker's apologies for the sound gaps and a few still-to-be-resolved editing issues, I could appreciate how the work—even unfinished—pushes the limits of cinematic expression in impressive ways. Pérez has dedicated his film to René Clair, and indeed renders a fitting tribute to the French master with this experimental feature.

In *Madrigal*, Pérez employs an innovative structure: the first part, immersed in the world of theater and featuring a cast of men dressed as nuns, is set in present-day Cuba; the second part, saturated with science-fiction conventions, takes place in a future time when Eros reigns and obligatory sex rules. Unifying these two sequences is the trope of fiction writing; early on, the protagonist (Carlos Enrique Almirante) seeks to draft his story, and then later it is this very tale that comes to life. *Madrigal* reveals that appearances can be deceiving; the real and the imagined merge in the film as do fact and fiction, truth and deception, present and future. These issues unfold in an atmosphere—saturated with gray tones and soft focus—that is nothing short of stunning.

The film is very innovative, with its lack of dialogue and some stunning juxtapositions. How did you develop the unique cinematic language in Havana Suite*?*

I trust images a lot, and try to rely on them. I wanted to make a non-dramatized film, one in which nothing happens in the way of a traditional narrative conflict. Because in *Havana Suite* there are no big conflicts—people wake up, brush their teeth, have breakfast, go to work, iron clothes, take a shower . . . and it was all about how to maintain the attention of the spectator with those minimal actions and then to penetrate the interior world of those characters using only images and sounds, not dialogue. The film tries to get the spectators to identify with the thoughts of those characters. This is what happens to me, for example, when I look at a painting by Edward Hopper and see melancholy characters immersed in their thoughts in a very intimate situation. When I look at the painting for a while I can feel how the characters feel. The visual reference of Hopper was a starting point for *Havana Suite*. It can be very difficult for me to express in words or concepts what moves in my mind; I do feel, though, that I can

Courtesy of ICAIC

Fernando Pérez gives instructions to Claudia Rojas during the filming of *Life is to Whistle*

sometimes express it through images, through the multiple associations images can create.

Havana Suite, *like all of your films, was selected for inclusion in numerous festivals around the world including the first International Sahara Film Festival. Based on your experiences in Africa, Cuba and elsewhere, what potential do you see in cinema for facilitating communication, fostering tolerance, and uniting us despite our differences?*
Cinema—and culture in general—are immensely important in bringing us together, and that's the way for us to understand each other in this world. Culture and education can unite us beyond the irrationality of war. When *Havana Suite* was shown as part of the first International Film Festival of the Sahara, I traveled to the Sahara Desert. The experience really marked me—I can't describe it with words—because for a long time I've been asking myself about the world we're living in—the violence, wars, inequality, irrationality—and all of the sudden there I was in the desert with some of the most important Spanish filmmakers at the first Sahara Film Festival. The films were shown in open air like in the Cuban documentary *For the First Time*, in the desert sand, with portable projectors.

It was a unique experience because you really felt that despite all differences of culture and customs and identity, real human communication can take place through art and culture. We are told that there's a Western culture and an Islamic culture and that they're different. I don't agree. I think what provokes conflict is fanaticism, imposition, dogma—not believing in the possibility of improving ourselves as human beings. When egoism, dogma, and the imposition of one opinion over another predominate, the world moves in a direction like the one in which we've been heading this century.

All of your films have succeeded in establishing communication with and among people from very different spheres —viewers in the Sahara Desert and around the world, international critics, and your Cuban compatriots. And all of them lend themselves to multiple readings . . .
I believe in a cinema—and perhaps herein lies the unity of my films—that searches for the complexity of reality. And I'll expand on this because it's a very important question . . . One of the characteristics of our cinema has been to seek complexity rather than to present a complacent or critical vision. On those occasions when I've left Cuba to present one of my films somewhere else, I've been asked whether my film is "for" or "against" Castro. And I say, "Why are you asking me that? I wanted to make a film about my reality." In my films I strive to express the complexity of my reality, my history, my time period, and myself as I experience this reality. What determines the relevance of this kind of cinema in the end is the artistic result.

Take *Havana Suite* for instance, a film that has generated a favorable opinion because of the way it moves the audience. But it's also been a polemical film. Why? Because it evokes divergent opinions. There are people who look at it as a film that reflects a reality of decay, hopelessness, and sadness. There are others who see it as a film that reflects a reality that, despite the difficulties, reaffirms the positive side, the existence of dreams. And between these two extremes are other points of view with still other nuances. I really wanted to make a film about the everyday life in my country, in Havana, but I also tried to encourage the audience to reflect. I'd like for spectators, after having watched the film, to ask themselves: "What is the meaning of life? What type of life am I living? What dreams do I or don't I have? What have or haven't I done to achieve my dreams? What type of life surrounds me? What is my context?" And if spectators ask themselves these questions, first at an emotive and then at a reflexive level, I feel the film achieves its goal.

As for the extreme positions, I was worried at the beginning and wondered how it was that the same film could generate such different responses. And a professor from the University of Havana explained, "Look, I think that what happens is that your film uses ambivalence." When I was talking about complexity, about expressing complexity, it's about the ambivalence of the reality . . . about the plurality of things. There isn't one absolute truth. I think there are many truths, many ways to see the reality according to the way you live it . . . Therefore, I think *Havana Suite* includes—just as our reality does—those extremes.

During the planning, filming, and editing phases of each of your three recent films, you confided to me your uncertainty. Does the fact that you often work with the same team—cinematographer Raúl Pérez Ureta, composer Edesio Alejandro, editor Julia Yip—enable you to take risks you might otherwise avoid?

Whenever I am going to make a film I feel very insecure. I don't really know what is going to come out. I'm not one of those who say, "This is like this and is going to come out like this." I say, "I really don't know what's going to happen."

I would be nothing and my films wouldn't be what they are without the collaboration of the photographer I've had, the composer, the editor . . . But one is sort of the conductor of the orchestra. I feel responsible for transmitting to them a feeling that enriches them, empowers them, and makes them give the best of themselves. That's my role as director—how to make really authentic the feeling you want to express and to do so in an artistically valid way. I believe cinema, as an art form, has to provoke an aesthetic emotion and then a reflection.

At times I've felt close to creating a film I wouldn't be interested in. And of course, that wouldn't have made me happy, but I wouldn't have felt frustrated, either, because it's something I'm prepared for. I feel that in art or in an artist's work you have to take risks knowing that you may or may not achieve your goals. It's like the baseball player . . . he can hit a home run but later strike out. A great hitter can strike out. There are times he just can't see the ball, and I know that can happen to me.

Havana Suite *ends with an epilogue of sorts. A photograph of each protagonist is accompanied by a description including name, profession, age, and his or her dream. If Fernando Pérez were a protagonist in this film, what text would accompany his image?*[1]

Well . . . "Fernando Pérez. Filmmaker. Fifty-nine years old. His dream is that he never lack the three things he loves most in life—my three children, cinema, and Cuba."

NOTE

This essay is dedicated to Frank Ernesto.

1. A further interview with this filmmaker on DVD is available from Cuban Cinema Classics (www.cubancinemaclassics.org) as is Pérez's documentary *Omara* (1983), a tribute to the legendary singer Omara Portuondo. *Life is to Whistle* is available from New Yorker Films (www.newyorkerfilms.com) and *Havana Suite* from Weisner Distribution in Puerto Rico.

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ABSTRACT Fernando Pérez reflects on making films in his native Cuba during the past fifteen years, a time of dramatic change on the island. His trilogy of recent films—*Madagascar, Life is to Whistle* and *Havana Suite*—provide a window into present-day Cuba while looking out onto the future. These works have earned Fernando Pérez the reputation as Cuba's most important filmmaker living today.

KEYWORDS Cuban cinema, Cuban film, Fernando Pérez, globalization, identity

BOOKS

REVIEW ESSAY

Film Writing on the Web: Some Personal Reflections

There's a part of me that understands perfectly why a minimalist like Jim Jarmusch and a nineteenth-century figure like Raul Ruiz won't have anything to do with email. "You can't *smell* email," Ruiz once said to me, to explain part of the reason for his distaste. But I find it tougher to feel nostalgic about film criticism before the Internet, because even though you *could* smell it, the choices of what you could lay your hands on outside a few well-stocked university libraries were fairly limited. Similarly, the choice of what films you could see outside a few cities like New York and Paris before DVDs was pretty narrow and possibly even more haphazard than what you could read about them.

These two developments shouldn't be considered in isolation from one another. The growth of film writing on the web—by which I mean stand-alone sites, print-magazine sites, chatgroups, and blogs—has proceeded in tandem with other communal links involving film culture that to my mind are far more important than the decline in the theatrical distribution of art films and independent films, so I'll be periodically discussing those links here.

When I started out as a cinephile in New York in the early 1960s, the English-language magazines that counted the most were the ones that went furthest in gathering together diverse constituencies: *Sight and Sound*, *Film Culture*, and *Film Quarterly*. Even the more local and partisan *New York Film Bulletin* was translating texts from *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Of course the film world was much smaller then and some of the nostalgia for that era undoubtedly focuses on the coziness. By the time film writing on the web started, film culture had spread and splintered into academia and journalism, which often lamentably functioned as mutually indifferent or sometimes even mutually hostile institutions. So the theoretical golden age, I assume, took place before all the institutionalizing.

Significantly, the most enterprising early efforts to disseminate film writing on the web were neither American nor English nor French, but Australian—most notably the academic and peer-reviewed *Screening the Past*, founded by classical and fine-arts scholar Ina Bernard in Melbourne in 1997, and the more journalistic *Senses of Cinema*, founded by filmmaker Bill Mousoulis in the same city in 1999. Both publications are still going strong—having published nineteen and forty issues respectively by late 2006, while continuing to keep all their previous issues online. (*Senses of Cinema* underwent several changes after the departure circa 2002 of Mousoulis and another editor, critic Adrian Martin, the latter of whom went on to co-found the no-less-ambitious *Rouge* in 2003.) It's easy to hypothesize that this Australian concentration came from both a highly developed and interactive local film community, and a desire to be recognized by and also to communicate with the wider world of cinephilia.

Three other extremely useful film sites that have by now become regarded as staples are the English and academic www.film-philosophy.com, the American and basically journalistic daily.greencine.com, and the international www.mastersofcinema.org (which functions mainly though not exclusively as a guide to what's coming out on DVD)—all especially valuable, as is *Senses of Cinema*, as conduits to other sites. Then there are the sites maintained by film magazines (e.g., *Sight and Sound*, *Film Comment*, *Cineaste*, *Cinema Scope*), which offer samples rather than exhaustive duplications of their latest issues, and those sites that have replaced former magazines on paper, such as *Bright Lights*.

My acquaintance with blogs and chatgroups has been more limited,[1] but a few of each might be mentioned here. Among the more notable critics' blogs are ones devoted to Serge Daney in English (sergedaney.blogspot.com) and to Raymond Durgnat (currently in hiatus, though expected to return), ones maintained by Fred Camper, Steve Erickson, Chris Fujiwara, and Dave Kehr, and Saul Symonds's www.lightsleepcinemamag.com, which also originated in Australia and prints or reprints a few texts by other critics not readily available elsewhere. The main chatgroups I'm familiar with are the auteurist "a film by," "film and politics" (which started out as a splinter group deriving from the former and is also on Yahoo), and a few separate groups located on the elaborate site www.wellesnet.com ("the Orson Welles web resource"). The latter calls to mind a slew of other director-based sites, including especially impressive ones devoted to Robert Bresson, Jonas Mekas, and Jacques Tati.

How wide are the readerships of such resources? Klaus Eder, who for many years has been the general secretary of FIPRESCI, the international film critics'

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organization, recently told me that *Undercurrent*—an online, English-language magazine established on their website in 2006, edited by Chris Fujiwara, that has so far published only three issues—had about 100,000 readers per month. Considering how specialized the magazine's turf is—encompassing such topics as the late film critic Barthélemy Amengual, Alexander Dovzhenko, the acting in Don Siegel's *Madigan* (1968), Austrian cinema, sound designer Leslie Schatz, assorted short films, and recent features about Cameron Crowe, Philippe Garrel, Danièle Huillet, Terrence Malick, Park Chan-wook, and Tsai Ming-liang—and considering that 100,000 readers seems to comprise more than those of all film magazines on paper combined, this was a startling piece of information and one that initially beggared belief. It was also hard to square this figure with one given to me by Gary Tooze regarding a recent piece of mine called "Ten Overlooked Fantasy Films on DVD (and Two That Should Be!)" on his much more commercial and consumer-oriented web site, www.dvdbeaver.com. (In that case, he estimated about 10,000 hits during the first week the article was posted.)

But once Klaus added that the average length of time spent by each reader of *Undercurrent* was roughly two minutes, I started to realize that my shock was premature and that my superimposition of two incompatible grids—one devoted to subscribers and readers of paper magazines such as *Cahiers du Cinéma, Film Quarterly*, and *Sight and Sound*, the other devoted to web surfers—could only lead to muddled conclusions. And I'm not sure that the comparison with *DVD Beaver* is very meaningful without the average length of time of each hit in that case, which I don't know.

I also recently learned from David Bordwell that his web site at www.davidbordwell.net "receives between 250–450 unique visitors each day, with an average of 2–3 pageloads per visitor. Most visitors on any day are first-time visitors, with about 60–100 coming back from a previous day. Heaviest usage is from the U.S. and Europe, which you'd expect." I don't think we can meaningfully compare these figures with the sales of Bordwell's books (which I didn't ask him about), and I'm not even sure how meaningfully we can compare Bordwell's site with *Undercurrent*, given the range of things that web-surfers are looking for. Bordwell largely uses his site to update and expand many of his writings on paper, and this already points to functions that are qualitatively different from those of published works.[2]

Extrapolating from all this, I started to realize that current claims that film criticism is becoming extinct, and counter-claims that it's entering a new golden age, are equally misguided if they assume that film criticism as an institution functions the same way on paper and in cyberspace, as two versions of the same thing rather than as separate enterprises. Related debates about the distribution of foreign films in the English-speaking world (drastically shrinking in theaters, drastically expanding in the production and distribution of DVDs), or the sophistication of young filmgoers regarding film history (growing if you follow some chatgroups, declining if you follow certain others), or the number of films that get made (even more difficult to determine if videos and films are treated interchangeably) seem equally incoherent due to the disparity of reference points, creating a Tower of Babel in a good many discussions. It's a central aspect of our alienated relation to language that when someone says, "I just saw a film," we don't know whether this person saw something on a large screen with hundreds of other people or alone on a laptop—or whether what he or she saw was on film, video, or DVD, regardless of where and how it was seen.

If sending an email to someone can sometimes partake of the kind of intimacy associated with whispering, there are also arguably new forms of interpersonal brutality that crop up periodically in chatgroups.

In short, we're living in a transitional period where enormous paradigmatic shifts should be engendering new concepts, new terms, and new kinds of analysis, evaluation, and measurement, not to mention new kinds of political and social formations, as well as new forms of etiquette. But in most cases they aren't doing any of those things. We're stuck with vocabularies and patterns of thinking that are still tied to the ways we were watching movies half a century ago.

If we consider briefly just the question of email and chatgroup etiquette, we already encounter a daunting array of new kinds of behavior. If sending an email to someone can sometimes partake of the kind of intimacy associated with whispering, there are also arguably new forms of interpersonal brutality that crop up periodically in chatgroups, obliging some leaders of such groups to impose certain standards of civility between members. Even definitions of what constitutes

WEBSITES DISCUSSED IN THIS ESSAY

www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound
www.brightlightsfilm.com
www.chicagoreader.com/movies
www.cineaste.com
www.cinema-scope.com
daily.greencine.com
davekehr.com
www.davidbordwell.net
www.dvdbeaver.com
www.filmlinc.com/fcm/fcm.htm [*Film Comment*]
www.fipresci.org/undercurrent
www.film-philosophy.com
www.fredcamper.com
home.earthlink.net/~steevee [Steve Erickson]
www.insanemute.com [Chris Fujiwara]
www.jonasmekas.com
kinoslang.blogspot.com
www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast
www.lightsleepcinemamag.com
www.mastersofcinema.org
www.mastersofcinema.org/bresson
movies.groups.yahoo.com/group/a_film_by
movies.groups.yahoo.com/group/film_and_politics
www.rouge.com.au
www.sensesofcinema.com
sergedaney.blogspot.com
www.tativille.com

a stranger or evaluations of the importance of typos have undergone a certain amount of transformation within the new context of chatgroups, and there are few of us who aren't still finding our bearings within such contexts.

In order to grasp some of the new tricks that some of the old dogs are failing to learn, it helps if we start redefining what we mean by community in relation to geography, which is central to all these paradigmatic shifts. It becomes relevant, for example, that Fujiwara edits *Undercurrent* from Tokyo as well as from Boston, and that the editor of *Film Quarterly*, published by the University of California Press, works out of London—and perhaps even that this sentence is initially being written on a plane between Chicago and Vancouver—especially if we persist in regarding the discourse of both magazines as a discourse being aimed at a specific geographically-based constituency seen in relation to a particular nation state, town or city, university or other institution. Speaking as someone who currently feels that he lives on the Internet more than he lives in Chicago, I consider this distinction vital to the ways that I function as a writer. Maybe it's also relevant that *Rouge*, the most impressive of the international online film magazines (translating some of its texts into English from Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish sources), originates from Australia—or at least from three Australian editors, who may at any given time be in France, Greece, or elsewhere while doing part of their editorial work. But if it *is* relevant, this is largely because Australia is itself multicultural, also yielding a multicultural, state-run TV channel, SBS, that similarly has few counterparts.

It's my own conviction that the nation state itself is fast becoming an outdated and dysfunctional concept, apart from the special interests of politicians and corporations and their own highly functional designation of countries as markets. It seems bewildering that while most of the world appears to detest George W. Bush as much as I do, this fact has been deemed totally irrelevant to political strategy and activity within the Democratic Party, so that the U.S. currently appears to be more isolated from the rest of the world than it was during the cold war—in spite of the unprecedented possibilities of communication and interactivity made possible by the Internet. And if we scale down this striking paradox to the more modest dimensions of film culture, the same anomalies are apparent. The choices of ordinary filmgoers are said to be steadily shrinking at the same time that most of the riches of world cinema are becoming internationally available for the first time on DVD.

Part of our problem in assessing our new conditions is a bad habit of often assuming by reflex that they're either bad or good—which is about as futile as arriving at such a simplistic conclusion about globalization. Let me try to illustrate this with a couple of extended personal anecdotes. Shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, I was invited by the *Chicago Reader*'s editor to write something reflecting on its aftermath. After she decided not to run my article, I received a similar invitation from *Senses of Cinema* and emailed them the same piece, somewhat rewritten.

I wrote about my fear of what I described as American as well as Middle Eastern terrorists—by which I meant Americans who suddenly started thinking about the vanished World Trade Center as if it were their own private property and the attacks of September 11 as if they were simply and unambiguously an "attack on America," thereby allowing the Middle Eastern terrorists and their assumed positions to set all the terms of

the discussion and automatically dismissing the non-Americans from over eighty countries who were destroyed in the attacks as irrelevant. I was especially upset by a poster with an American flag over the words "September 11, 2001 / We Will Not Forget," placed on the front door of the building where I live in Chicago by an upstairs neighbor, who didn't bother to consult anyone else in the nine-unit building about it. Feeling that flags were already being used to intimidate, to stop conversations rather than start them, I objected at our next condo meeting that "we will not forget" in this context meant that we *will* forget all the non-Americans killed —at which point my neighbor left the room and refused to discuss the matter further, with the result that his poster remained up for many weeks afterwards. I concluded that I was tempted to attribute part of this terrible climate to a certain "narcissism about mourning" that a visiting German filmmaker had recently mentioned to me with regard to some of her New York friends and acquaintances.

Less than an hour after the issue of *Senses of Cinema* containing my article appeared online, I received an abusive email from a New York film critic whom I knew only slightly and who wrote me, in a fit of rage, that I had no moral right to accuse people like him of being narcissistic about mourning when he could still smell the ashes of burnt flesh from his apartment. So three extremely disparate and irreconcilable definitions of community were affecting me all at once: a feeling of repression, censorship, and bullying in the building where I live; an ability to express this feeling freely and openly to like-minded individuals on a web site located on the other side of the planet; and an almost traumatic sensation of being assaulted by an acquaintance 800 miles away for expressing the same feeling. The first and last of these experiences were nightmarish and dystopian, the second was utopian, and the second two were possible only because of the Internet—because I can't imagine that the New York acquaintance would ever have phoned me with the same message. And only the first was geographically matched with where I happened to be.

My second anecdote relates to the recent death of Danièle Huillet, the filmmaking partner of Jean-Marie Straub, and how this was both discovered and dealt with by many people via "a film by." Shortly after I learned about this shocking and upsetting occurrence, when a friend in New York, critic Kent Jones, phoned me, I posted what little information I had in this chatgroup, and for roughly the first twenty-four hours there was little if any response. But when responses then started to come, they were detailed and far-ranging, and came from such diverse quarters as Los Angeles, Paris, the American Midwest, and Melbourne. They included photographs of Huillet as a little girl growing up on a farm (posted at kinoslang.blogspot.com) which I had never even known existed, information about the first digital video of Straub-Huillet (which later proved to be obtainable online), links to an article in *Libération* and many older English-language texts—and a detailed (and somewhat contentious) discussion about an obituary written by Dave Kehr for the *New York Times*, an obituary that conceivably might not have been written if the news about Huillet's death hadn't been posted in "a film by."

More generally, the kind of discourse and behavior one encounters in "a film by" seems to run the gamut from news and critical analysis to childish and protracted exchanges of insults—a mix that is by no means restricted to chatgroups dealing with film, and which also can be characterized as split between occasional and habitual (or even compulsive) contributors—those who periodically visit and those who appear to do very little apart from exchange comments. Significantly, this particular group was initially formed by critics Fred Camper and Peter Tonguette to counter the impolite behavior in other film chatgroups, and it continues to be monitored for that reason, but this hasn't prevented the discussions from periodically descending into invective that overwhelms other forms of communication. It would be interesting to hear from psychologists and/or psychoanalysts about the psychic reservoirs and "family plots" that appear to be tapped into by these exchanges, leading to forms of behavior that seem to be specific to the Internet and periodically undermine some of the more progressive and utopian possibilities.

Thanks to the site of www.cinema-scope.com, where I write a regular column called "Global Discoveries on DVD" that usually appears online, I received one of the most exciting glimpses of the utopian possibilities inherent in film writing on the web. For some time, I have been fantasizing that ciné-clubs, a major spur to French cinephilia over most of the past century, could be making a comeback, this time in global terms, thanks to DVDs. These ciné-clubs could be situated almost anywhere, in houses and apartments as well as in storefronts, and a model configuration might be touring "retrospectives" on DVD in which the DVDs could be sold at the screenings (perhaps along with relevant books and/or pamphlets), in much the same way that CDs are now often sold by music groups in clubs between their sets. And if enough circuits for these

retrospectives could become established in this fashion, this could ultimately finance the production of these packages. In some ways this dream has already been realized in the U.S. by www.moveon.org and the way it has arranged private showings of such Robert Greenwald documentaries as *Uncovered: The War in Iraq* and *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (both 2004), *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005), and *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006), but it doesn't appear to have caught on with other kinds of films.

While attending the Mar del Plata film festival last spring, I met a schoolteacher based in Cordoba who had established a few ciné-clubs in separate small towns that he visited on a regular basis, and the films he showed included some of the more specialized and esoteric films I had written about, including Forough Farrokzhad's *The House is Black* (1962) and Kira Muratova's *Chekhov's Motifs* (2002). He told me the combined audiences of such screenings for each film was somewhere between 700 and 800 people. Considering how unlikely it would be to fill single auditoriums of that size in most major cities of the world for such films, I realized that the shifting paradigms of today might also transform what we normally regard as a minority taste. Once the paradigm of a single geographical base changes, all sorts of things can be transformed. Maybe Muratova's craziest feature is too difficult for most New Yorkers and Parisians, but once it can be acquired globally on DVD with the right subtitles, anything becomes possible—including a sizable group of viewers in Cordoba.

NOTES

1. Since writing this essay, I have started blogging at blogs.chicagoreader.com/film
2. I was chagrined to discover that an essay of mine on *Eyes Wide Shut* reprinted in *American Movie Critics* by the Library of America, a publisher celebrated for its "definitive" editions, introduced a typo in the opening paragraph that reversed the meaning of the sentence, changing "argue" to "agree"—a typo that hadn't occurred in any of the article's three other appearances on paper. Ironically, if such a typo had occurred in the *Chicago Reader*, where the article first appeared, it could have been corrected a day later in the *Reader*'s online edition, whereas the Library of America's typo, barring a second edition, is permanent.

   But this doesn't necessarily make the *Reader*'s online system superior in all respects. For the past several years, due to space restrictions regarding the *Reader*'s paper edition, all its capsule film reviews that run past a particular length now have to be permanently shortened for both the paper and its online editions. Thus the older issues on paper preserve longer capsules that are no longer available anywhere else, while the capsules available online can theoretically be altered on a week to week basis and thus have none of the same archival status and value.

JONATHAN ROSENBAUM is film critic for the *Chicago Reader* and the author of *Discovering Orson Welles* (University of California Press, 2007).

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ERRATA

We regret that, due to an error of editing, two mistakes were introduced on the opening page of Marsha Orgeron's article in *FQ* 60, no. 2: 38. The image caption should have read: "A glimpse of Samuel Fuller on one of the 16mm reels he shot during WWII." The epigraph should have read: "8-point Goudy, Widescreen Pica gauge, Moviola—reporter and film director spill blood on the same emotional battlefield of what is fit to print, and what is fit to film."

Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture

By Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005. $35.00 cloth. 464 pages.

With particular emphasis on the years 1934–36, which saw the rise of the democratizing Popular Front, this book explores 1930s French politics and culture with reference both to everyday Parisian life and to wider questions of political engagement. It is divided into two parts: the first focuses on key individuals or publications and their impact on political debate, the second on overarching changes in the cultural environment.

In order to understand how the Popular Front came about, the authors rightly emphasize the context of economic depression, brutally suppressed strikes, and economic scandals, but this is not their only framing of the period. In their introduction, Andrew and Ungar use as a key to open up their research *the* scandal of that epoch: the Stavisky affair. Alongside the historical study of this scandal is a detailed analysis of Alain Resnais's 1974 film about it (simply titled *Stavisky*), in which the authors go into considerable detail about the "harmonics of history" embedded in the film as well as its reception by the press. Fascinating, innovative, and playful as this approach is, investing so much meaning and cultural value in a single film is somewhat disconcerting as a form of analysis aimed at exploring the history of political culture. The authors' metonymic approach in the introduction resurfaces elsewhere in the book (either in respect of a film or of an individual star or filmmaker) and it is at odds with the dialogical approach which otherwise prevails. In the chapter entitled "The Lower Depths," for example, Jean Gabin embodies an everyday working-class Paris and Marcel Carné epitomizes the city through the hyperrealism of his film sets.

There are some truly illuminating chapters and sections in the book, notably those on architecture, photography, music hall, the café concert, the popular press (in particular *Illustration*), popular media (especially the radio)—and indeed they would have gained from even further exploration. The authors give a valuable and lively sense of the epoch. In chapter one of part one, for example, there is a fascinating account of newspapers and journals (both left- and right-wing) and their fluctuating fortunes and allegiances. The investigation, in part two, of fashion photography and art déco and how it was commodified for export to Hollywood is alive with detail as is the in-depth analysis of the shifting fortunes of, and strategies of defence adopted by, the café concert and the music hall in the light of ever-expanding cinema theaters. The authors put a number of myths straight as regards the "media wars" between the more established café concerts and the music hall, on the one hand, and the cinema, on the other. The authors demonstrate that the demise of the café concert was more due to the success of music halls than the advent of cinema. Because of their size, music halls could sell seats cheaply and pack people in for all sorts of extravaganzas the cafés could never afford given their much more intimate scale. Moreover, music halls had means whereby they could compete with cinema. For example they could feature nudity where cinema could not and this increased their popularity and success.

The great strength of the book derives from detailed unravelings of specific phenomena and its vivid evocation of French popular culture in the 1930s. Less engaging, however, are some of the more ponderous sections on intellectuals—particularly the in-depth study of the journal *L'Esprit*. The discussion of De Rougemont in that same chapter begins fascinatingly but gets bogged down, perhaps because this part of the study is less linked to everyday life. By the same token, there seemed to me to be far too much detail on the *Cahiers de Revendication* (assuming a fascination with the topic that readers may not share). Conversely, the relocating of Céline as unclassifiable within the shifting political terrain of this period rather than pro- or proto-fascist (as he is often labeled) is a most interesting and welcome outcome of the book's strategy of investigation. By looking at that period through its contemporary journalism, Andrew and Unger are able to show that Céline was truly an anarchist above all else.

There are several minor things that irritate or perplex. First, the lack of a proper bibliography—all references are in the footnotes (this may be the tendency in American publications but it would be a lot more user-friendly if a bibliography were provided). Second, the assumption that *Stavisky* forms part of the retro trend in 1970s film. This rather blunts the truly political edge of both this film and Resnais's work in general. The 1970s saw the development in France of a civic–political cinema and certainly many film historians would classify *Stavisky* as one such film. Third, the choice of films throughout the book is rather predictable, rarely bringing in less well-known works. The chapter on colonialism begins to hint at some new material but then regrettably remains with widely known films. Much of 1930s French cinema is neglected now and an opportunity to rectify that state of affairs has been missed. For all the many elements that will thrill and engage readers, this long-gestating book is less than the sum of its parts. It is a compelling testament to the authors' personal enthusiasms and, as such, it might better have been subtitled, in the singular, *A Poetics of Culture*.

SUSAN HAYWARD is Chair of Cinema Studies at Exeter University. She is the author, most recently, of *Simone Signoret: The Star as Cultural Sign* (Continuum, 2004) and a study of *Les Diaboliques* (University of Illinois Press, 2005).

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

D.I. Grossvogel on Michael Haneke

New Korean Cinema

Edited by Chi-Yun Shin and Julian Stringer. Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh University Press, 2005. $65.00 cloth; $22.00 paper. 234 pages.

The first part of this anthology provides a clear and comprehensive overview of the changes that have taken place in the Korean film industry since the mid-1980s—changes that are necessary to understand the significance of the Korean film boom in relation to the Hollywood-led global film industry. Essays in the subsequent two parts aim to trace out the generic transformations of contemporary Korean films, which have both catered to and shaped the audiences' taste for such genres as gangster films, thrillers, and comedies (part two), and discuss recurring sociopolitical issues in contemporary Korean cinema—long forbidden or neglected due to censorship—such as more than two decades of military rule, political trauma, and marginalized sexuality (part three).

New Korean Cinema avoids the pitfall of identifying an emerging national cinema as a unified film movement with a handful of auteurs, a recognizable film style, and discernible themes. The essays approach contemporary Korean cinema relationally, by paying proper attention to the diverging —sometimes opposite—reception of Korean films by domestic and international audiences. Lee Hyang-jin, for example, delineates the contrasting reception of veteran director Im Kwon-taek's *Chunhyang* (2000) in the domestic and international markets and critiques how formal experimentation in the film—Im's subordination of the film medium to the oral tradition of *pansori*, a traditional Korean performance art—eliminate the dramatic and emotional resonance of the original story. Julian Stringer traces out the ambiguities and indeterminacies in the generic labeling of contemporary Korean films and the ways in which Korean cinema, when exported, is reclassified in accordance with shifting exhibition contexts.

Despite the valuable insights this anthology provides, I feel the need to question the adequacy of the label "New Korean Cinema." Shin and Stringer characterize New Korean Cinema as "a distinct form of *commercial* film-making" (3, my italics), which departs from both the old apprenticeship-based system of film practice that produced directors like Im, and the Korean New Wave of the 1980s. New Korean Cinema is a result of new production, distribution, and marketing strategies (such as blockbusters); a generational shift in both directors and their audiences; and the rise of a new film culture (6). New Korean Cinema is also known for its box-office success at the domestic market, consistently outdrawing Hollywood cinema.

There exists, however, a seeming discontinuity between the label "New Korean Cinema" characterized by Shin and Stringer and the films analyzed in the rest of the book. It must be stated that with the exception of *Friend, Tell Me Something* (both 2001), and *Attack the Gas Station* (1999), most of the films discussed are not prototypical examples of New Korean Cinema as defined above (although each certainly deserves close reading on its own). *Take Care of My Cat* (2001), *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Phantom the Submarine* (1999), *Memento Mori* (1999), *Turning Gate* (2002), *Peppermint Candy* (2000), and *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (2000) all performed disappointingly at the box office. These films are not suited to be classified as "commercial" cinema, as they clearly target festival audiences (especially *Peppermint Candy* and *Turning Gate*). In fact, most of the films selected for close analysis in the anthology do not appear to be a direct outcome of the commercialization and conglomeration of the Korean film industry, but rather seem a by-product or parallel practice to that which counters and interacts with heavily commercialized industry practices. Therefore the question should be rearticulated: how does the Korean film industry, with its rapid commercialization and conglomeration for the last decade, allow for the production of films of innovative "aesthetic mutations" (7), yet with less commercial value? Are such films pure anomalies? Or, on what terms are Korean filmmakers negotiating between industry demands and their aesthetic predilections—as witnessed in *Memento Mori* or *Symapthy for Mr. Vengeance*?

A further problem with Shin and Stringer's characterization and periodization of New Korean Cinema lies in their overemphasis on the New Korean Cinema's "break" from rather than "continuity" with its precedents. Certainly new methods of film financing, distribution, and exhibition brought about significant changes in the Korean film industry. However, how are films directed by Lee Chang-dong and Hong Sang-soo "qualitatively different" (2) from pre-1990s New Wave films? Lee's films—including *Peppermint Candy*—seem to me to have more in common with the New Wave films of the 1980s than with contemporary blockbusters of the 1990s such as *Shiri*. It is hard to identify the "newness" of Korean cinema with either the commercially driven films of the 1990s or the New Wave of the 1980s. Perhaps a better term would be a "second Korean film renaissance." Such a term would embrace both types of filmmaking and would point to the historical precedent found in 1960s Korea, when film attendance soared at the same time that internationally acclaimed directors emerged.

Lastly, a comment should be made about the way film genres are classified throughout the book. Unlike Stringer, whose essay focuses on the filmic *discourse* on generic labeling and its relation to the marketing strategy of Korean films, a number of authors appeal to the range of emotions evoked in order to make genre classifications of contemporary Korean cinema. Kyu Kyun Kim claims that crime thriller *Tell Me Something* and *Mr. Vengeance* "are horror films through and through" (106), since they evoke terror in the viewer. Shin refers to gangster cinema *Friend* (2001) as "male melodrama" (121) and Nancy Abelmann and June-ah Choi claim that in comedy *Attack the Gas Station* (1999) the four protagonists evoke "melodramatic" sympathy from the viewer (137). Conversely, Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient characterize romance film *Asako in Ruby Shoes* (2000) as "wistful, yet astringent, anti-melodrama" (194). However, a distinction should be made between the moment-by-moment presence and/or absence of an emotion and the pre-focused emotions that a film genre structurally aims to evoke.

Most genre films engage a range of emotions, not a single type of emotion. An action film can have a comic relief, but this does not make it a comedy.

"Melodrama" or "melodramatic" in the discussion of individual films appears to be equated with the expression of heightened emotion and sentimentality. However, if melodrama is employed in order to underscore the hybridity of Korean genres—the presence of melodramatic elements in many Korean genres due to the longevity and predominance of melodrama in the history of Korean cinema—it should be pointed out more specifically to what extent gangster cinema and comedy employ the generic conventions of melodrama in terms of narrative development and trajectory, the range of viewer and character knowledge, character motivation, and the expression of character emotions. It is true that both *Friend* and *Attack the Gas Station* appeal to sentimentality to build sympathetic characters but *Friend* is more structurally similar to melodrama than *Attack the Gas Station*, due to its character motivation and use of chance, as well as the way music punctuates its characters' emotions.

All in all, the essays collected in this anthology are useful in both providing a background to the industry and launching discussion and debate about individual films. This anthology certainly helps demonstrate why Korean cinema is worthy of the critical and commercial attention that it currently receives.

JINHEE CHOI is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Carleton University, Canada, and currently a postdoctoral associate at Yale University. She is the co-editor of *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2005) with Noël Carroll.

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Reframing British Cinema, 1918–1928: Between Restraint and Passion

By Christine Gledhill. London: BFI Publishing, 2004. $70.00 cloth; $30.50 paper. 224 pages.

Every so often, though the occurrence is rare, a book emerges that transcends its status as an exploration of a specific subject and becomes instead a method, a model for scholarship, a way of looking at the cinema that can potentially change our engagement with the medium. Christine Gledhill's *Reframing British Cinema* is such a book. Gledhill, whose contributions to feminist film criticism are extremely well known, here takes on what might be considered the dark ages of British cinema, the period between the end of World War I and the coming of sound, during which the British industry by all accounts struggled economically and creatively. That Gledhill convincingly argues for the quality and significance of the British films of this period is only one of the book's many virtues. Perhaps more important for the scholar of cinema is the way in which she goes about the painstaking task of poring over the output of a film culture at what has been widely considered a moribund moment in its history . . . and finding within it great riches.

Gledhill's exemplary synthetic model of research brings together a wide range of interdisciplinary ideas that include Nikolaus Pevsner's work on the cultural geography of English art and Martin Meisel's research on nineteenth-century narrative, pictorial, and theatrical forms in Britain. She combines them with a rigorous reading of the best available literature on British cinema, including the work of Pam Cook, Charles Barr, and Andrew Higson. Where Gledhill's book truly distinguishes itself is through its exhaustive examination of primary source documents, including industry journals of the period, reviews, and articles in the popular press, as well as the voluminous writings of the filmmakers of the time that appeared in both mass-circulation and trade publications. While neither the borrowing of theoretical models from outside film studies nor the employment of primary source material is novel, it is the way in which Gledhill uses Pevsner, Meisel, and the major cinema-specific works to sketch the broad outlines of the study, and then uses the primary source material to fill in, shade, and provide sound evidence for her contentions that helps make her approach such a distinctive and useful model for further scholarship.

Equally significant is Gledhill's close attention to the films themselves. Her descriptions of shots, sequences, and narrative trajectories are so detailed that the reader is almost given the impression of actually seeing the films under discussion. The consistent mention of shot scales, angles, editing, compositional strategies, and actor blocking gives Gledhill's analysis a cinematic specificity that is too often missing from contemporary film scholarship. While this level of descriptive density can occasionally become a bit unwieldy, the fact that so few people have seen the films she discusses makes the abundance of synopsis necessary.

In one of the book's most compelling sections, Gledhill examines the work of four important British directors of the period—Cecil Hepworth, Maurice Elvey, Graham Cutts, and Alfred Hitchcock—demonstrating their stylistic richness as well as the clear continuities evident in British production practices of the time. Hepworth's sense of landscape and shot composition in films like *Tansy* (1921) and *Pipes of Pan* (1923), Elvey's radical use of editing in films such as *Comradeship* (1919) and *Mademoiselle d'Armentiéres* (1926) to create a nearly abstract construction of cinematic space, and Cutts's innovative use of camera movement and angle in *The Wonderful Story* (1922) and *The Triumph of the Rat* (1926) all demand a rethinking of these often neglected filmmakers' contributions to the history of film. Cutts in particular appears to require a critical reevaluation. Hitchcock's role as an art director, screenwriter, and assistant director on several of Cutts's most important films has resulted in the positive qualities of these works being attributed more to Hitchcock, in no small part because of Hitchcock's continuous and not uncharacteristic dismissal of Cutts's directing talent. In Gledhill's discussion of *The Manxman* (1929), she argues that Hitchcock, rather than being the anomaly within the British industry that is so often claimed, was actually working within a network of influences and practices that make his work a logical extension of that of his predecessors, Hepworth, Elvey, and especially Cutts.

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Gledhill's outstanding research and open approach to the subject matter allow her to repeatedly refute much orthodoxy concerning the history of the British cinema. In chapters on acting styles and the relationship between the British stage and screen, Gledhill posits the radical notion that perhaps the division between film and theater has been somewhat overstated and that in the British context an analysis of the connection between the two might be more productive that fixing on their differences. This approach is particularly useful in relation to British acting style and its embrace of an aesthetic of restraint. This quality, which she ties quite persuasively to ideals and tensions within the larger British culture, is shown to transcend the division between the theatrical and the cinematic to become a pathway towards the exploration of more fundamental issues of class and national character.

Also, rather than seeing British film culture as suspended industrially and artistically between the United States and Europe, as so many other works have maintained, Gledhill demonstrates that the British cinema of the period was instead the product of a variety of indigenous influences ranging from the theatrical and literary works of the times to the importance of the English landscape and the complexities of its class structure. She is particularly informative in conveying the impact of a tradition of narrative pictorialism on the British filmmakers of the time that goes a long way towards explaining the industry's predilection for mise-en-scène and composition as opposed to the spatial and temporal fragmentation of editing that was changing cinematic practice in the U.S., Europe, and the Soviet Union.

Gledhill refers to her method as cultural poetics, a term that seems familiar but in this case takes on something of a fresh significance, as she merges extraordinarily in-depth research, both theoretical and primary, a precision of cinematic description that has rarely been equaled, a willingness to thoroughly examine, and if necessary discard, previously held beliefs about the subject, all in the service of illuminating not merely the British film industry that serves as the focal subject of the study, but also British culture at large. Her conclusions about the place of the cinema in negotiating issues of social class, heritage, and modernization, as well as her clear and useful methodology extend the value of this study beyond a renewed understanding of British film during its darkest hour, towards the establishment of a broader relationship between cinema and culture. Now we all must see the Cutts–Ivor Novello collaboration, *The Rat* (1925), Elvey's *Hindle Wakes* (1927), Adrian Brunel's *The Man Without Desire* (1923), and George Cooper's *If Youth But Knew* (1926), just to begin to enjoy and understand the work of this previously neglected period in British national cinema.

EVAN LIEBERMAN teaches in the Film Studies department at Emory University in Atlanta and is currently working on a book entitled *The Moving Image* with David Cook for Oxford University Press.

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ART AND INDUSTRY

Architecture for the Screen: A Critical Study of Set Design in Hollywood's Golden Age

By Juan Antonio Ramirez. Jefferson, NC: McFarlane, 2004. $45.00 cloth. 247 pages.

Though largely unknown to an English-speaking readership, Juan Antonio Ramirez has been, since the late 1970s, one of Spain's most appreciated art historians. Author of such quirky studies as *Edificios y sueños* (Buildings and Dreams, 1991) and *The Beehive Metaphor* (1998), which traces the iconographic influence of the beehive and apian communities upon architectural design of the Modern movement, Ramirez's work often tackles a familiar subject (in *Beehive*: Gaudí, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright) from an imaginative point of view, but never at the expense of rigorous research and pointed, sober commentary about the surfaces and meanings of the artworks in question.

Originally published in Spanish in 1986 (just months before Donald Albrecht's seminal *Designing Dreams: Architecture in the Movies*), *Architecture for the Screen* is one of the few serious book-length studies devoted to the art and styles of film set design. With this book, Ramirez contributes to a small but growing literature, which includes the first significant history of the field, Léon Barsacq's *Le Décors du film* (1970; published in English as *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions* [1976]); the richly illustrated *Screen Deco* (1985) and *Forties Style* (1989), both penned by Howard Mandelbaum and Eric Myers; and Beverly Heisner's two books, *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios* (1990) and *Production Design in the Contemporary American Film* (1997). Inventive and meticulous (even though it is let down by some sloppy copy-editing for this edition), *Architecture for the Screen* is a valuable, pioneering contribution to an underdeveloped area of film research.

Translator John F. Moffitt introduces Ramirez's method as "iconological," engaged in "an intense interpretive treatment of the historical metamorphosis of cultural themes underlying certain art works" (1). But, cognizant that his readership may not be familiar with the métier of set design, Ramirez does not embark immediately on interpretation. The first half of the book addresses style in set design in terms of the techniques and crafts that comprise the art. Here, Ramirez's masterful handling of primary sources is on full display as he unearths and analyzes critical and on-set accounts relating to the design process. He investigates the influx of design talent from outside the film industry (several prominent set designers brought with them techniques and styles from architecture, stage and interior design, painting, and illustration), devotes considerable attention to set construction and dressing, as well as the building of permanent and impermanent, complete and fragmentary sets. It is in these sections that Ramirez examines the factors that lead to the forging of individual and group styles, the working conditions for set designers (which tended to vary from studio to

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By Juan Antonio Ramirez. Jefferson, NC: McFarlane, 2004. $45.00 cloth. 247 pages.

Though largely unknown to an English-speaking readership, Juan Antonio Ramirez has been, since the late 1970s, one of Spain's most appreciated art historians. Author of such quirky studies as *Edificios y sueños* (Buildings and Dreams, 1991) and *The Beehive Metaphor* (1998), which traces the iconographic influence of the beehive and apian communities upon architectural design of the Modern movement, Ramirez's work often tackles a familiar subject (in *Beehive*: Gaudí, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright) from an imaginative point of view, but never at the expense of rigorous research and pointed, sober commentary about the surfaces and meanings of the artworks in question.

Originally published in Spanish in 1986 (just months before Donald Albrecht's seminal *Designing Dreams: Architecture in the Movies*), *Architecture for the Screen* is one of the few serious book-length studies devoted to the art and styles of film set design. With this book, Ramirez contributes to a small but growing literature, which includes the first significant history of the field, Léon Barsacq's *Le Décors du film* (1970; published in English as *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions* [1976]); the richly illustrated *Screen Deco* (1985) and *Forties Style* (1989), both penned by Howard Mandelbaum and Eric Myers; and Beverly Heisner's two books, *Hollywood Art: Art Direction in the Days of the Great Studios* (1990) and *Production Design in the Contemporary American Film* (1997). Inventive and meticulous (even though it is let down by some sloppy copy-editing for this edition), *Architecture for the Screen* is a valuable, pioneering contribution to an underdeveloped area of film research.

Translator John F. Moffitt introduces Ramirez's method as "iconological," engaged in "an intense interpretive treatment of the historical metamorphosis of cultural themes underlying certain art works" (1). But, cognizant that his readership may not be familiar with the métier of set design, Ramirez does not embark immediately on interpretation. The first half of the book addresses style in set design in terms of the techniques and crafts that comprise the art. Here, Ramirez's masterful handling of primary sources is on full display as he unearths and analyzes critical and on-set accounts relating to the design process. He investigates the influx of design talent from outside the film industry (several prominent set designers brought with them techniques and styles from architecture, stage and interior design, painting, and illustration), devotes considerable attention to set construction and dressing, as well as the building of permanent and impermanent, complete and fragmentary sets. It is in these sections that Ramirez examines the factors that lead to the forging of individual and group styles, the working conditions for set designers (which tended to vary from studio to

studio), the impact of the coming of sound upon design strategies, and the overall "driving functionalism" of design techniques (93).

The second half carries Ramirez's Panofskyian project forward by detailing the manner in which Hollywood designers borrow from and alter for the sake of the screen a range of architectural styles, from Mesopotamian to colonial baroque to art deco. "Given the Eclectic climate of American architecture," he notes in reference to an instructive example, "'Baroque' décors might often appear in movies with storylines not necessarily set in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (168). The underlying premise here is that the moviegoer's eye had been trained, given the proliferation and manipulation of styles in actual architecture, not to expect filmmakers to commit themselves to designs that are geographically or historically authentic, allowing the cinema to develop its own architectural symbology. Pried free of its original context, the "decorative overload" of such films as *Dracula* (1931), *Dodsworth* (1936), and *Camille* (1937) congeal into a uniquely cinematic architectural style, which Ramirez dubs "Bourgeois Baroque" in order to capture the symbolic rather than historical purchase of this form. *Camille*'s "exaggerated and curved moldings" therefore denote "wealth, distinction, power"—elements required in a film of this genre but having little to do with the historic baroque period (168). In fact, Ramirez eventually concludes that the pattern of development of particular architectural styles in film history shows that certain designs eventually became affixed to particular film genres.

Linking these two halves is the thesis that the first few decades of the twentieth century, characterized by the "ahistorical appropriation" and deliberate stylization "of diversely historical architectural styles," or "Eclecticism," "enjoyed a double resurrection, both in real buildings and on the silver screen" (114). Hollywood set design therefore manifested in its own ways a period style in American architectural design.

Yet, Ramirez's conception of the history of Hollywood "scenographic" style by no means miscalculates the complexity of the pressures and influences of film practice upon production design. He avoids the trap of contending that Hollywood pictures from the 1920s to the 1950s simply exemplified a dominant style in an art form whose currents are potentially altogether separate from those of cinema. Set and production designers like Anton Grot and Joseph Urban may have been imported from outside the industry, and the sets they designed may have exhibited the traits of movements within American architecture, but successful designers do not "go into business for themselves" and design sets that ignore the force of habit in Hollywood storytelling: "one cannot overemphasize the fact that *the function* of architecture in the movies was/is primarily and essentially *dramatic*" (215). Indeed, Ramirez's analysis of the give-and-take between architectural forms and cinematic ones confirms art historian Jonathan Gilmore's assertion in his 2000 book, *The Life of A Style*, that any dominant or higher-level style (in this case, Hollywood classicism) can be the platform for lower-level styles that serve the same motives that propel the dominant one but that, nevertheless, can function semi-autonomously. In this way, the syncretistic impetus of set designers can coexist with and serve the conventions of classical continuity.

The ultimate value of Ramirez's study lies in the balance it creates between a conscious and appropriate introductory tone, on the one hand, and scrupulous research and sophisticated understanding of the intricacies of the history of film style, on the other. The author reminds us that architectural style of sets in the classical period served a complex mix of motives. Because many set designers were not originally film artists or craftsmen (but rather imported for prestige reasons, to create non-narrative attractions to whet the appetite of an expanding audience), they were especially influenced by figures and movements outside film. Perhaps unlike any other prominent practitioner in the history of American moviemaking, the set designer of the classical period shouldered the burden of *several* artistic traditions—the demands of the classical continuity system for "functional" sets, the historical–stylistic architectural traditions of the past, and the imaginative reinterpretation of these styles in the vein of twentieth-century American architectural revivalism.

COLIN BURNETT is a Ph.D. candidate in Film at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers

By Lisa Kernan. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. $60.00 cloth; $22.95 paperback. 308 pages

Lisa Kernan's book, adapted from her 2000 UCLA dissertation, is the first extended attempt to treat trailers as a specific form and her sophisticated analysis demonstrates that the form is rich enough to sustain the attention. If anything, the textual and contextual density of this commercial–narrative hybrid provides Kernan with too much to work with. The book's theoretical chapters cast a particularly broad net of approaches, setting up expectations for their development in the close analyses that are in many cases unfulfilled. Eisenstein, Brecht, Metz, Iser, Barthes, Ernst Bloch, Gérard Genette, Susan Stewart, Kenneth Burke, not to mention a claim for the carnivalesque all briefly make early walk-on cameos before largely disappearing from the body of the book. However, her rhetoric-based analysis, synthesizing the languages of both semiotic and commodity theories, effectively draws on a wide range of previous film scholarship, particularly genre and star theory, which she uses to good effect in drawing out the contradictions of trailers' elaborate dance of revealing and concealing. Kernan is most impressive in analyzing how trailers create "consciousness" both anticipatory and nostalgic, not only within "their rhetoric per se" but "in the 'spaces between' the images of the trailer montage" (216).

From a list of some 850 viewed examples from UCLA's archives, Kernan picks nine case studies "that clearly and interestingly demonstrated the rhetorical inscription of as-

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From a list of some 850 viewed examples from UCLA's archives, Kernan picks nine case studies "that clearly and interestingly demonstrated the rhetorical inscription of as-

sumptions about the film's audience and its desires" (33) from each of three historical periods. The periods, labeled "classical" (1927–50), "transitional" (1950–75), and "contemporary" (1975–present), mark a movement away from an undifferentiated, "generalized" audience address towards one increasingly fragmented by such factors as gender and class. While the label "transitional" raises unaddressed teleological questions, this period is possibly Kernan's most interesting, as she documents a repeated failure of nerve to incorporate into trailers the transformations and newly challenging elements of the films themselves. Moreover, the book's historical component is clearly weakened by Kernan's decision to quickly pass over silent film trailers. And the fact that she largely ignores both lowbrow exploitation and highbrow foreign films—she labels *The Pawnbroker* (1965) and *Trojan Women* (1971) "art films" (52, 69)—in favor of widely known, middlebrow American "classics," undermines her claims about the role of class in trailers' address.

Still, Kernan's general historical argument seems broadly sound, if overstated. Her description of the pre-1950 period as "the era before films were clearly targeted to male or female audiences" would carry more force had her analyses clearly acknowledged the so-called "woman's picture" by including a stronger example than *History is Made at Night* (1937). The gender targeting of classical-era audiences by this genre began with their very titles (*Harriet Craig* [1950], *Daisy Kenyon* [1947], *Sadie McKee* [1934], *Letty Lynton* [1932]) and stars (Joan Crawford) and as a group their narratives loudly dispute Kernan's characterization of "woman's point of view and identity" in *Duel in the Sun* (1946) as "a novel feature for films of the time" (111).

The book's title refers to Kernan's provocative appropriation of Tom Gunning's historically specific "cinema of attractions" to argue an equivalence between the "spatially discontinuous, narratively reconfigured, figurally schematized film texts" (208) of continuity-era trailers and the "vaudeville" and "circus" modes of address of the pre-continuity "early cinema" (18) of Méliès and Porter. Still, it would be easier to dismiss the nagging suspicion that this use of Gunning ultimately amounts to little more than a convenient pun—"cinema of (coming) attractions"—had Kernan spent more time acknowledging the radical differences between a form she calls "perhaps the most montage-driven signifying system in the regime of popular cinema" and what was perhaps the least montage-driven signifying system in cinema's history. Similarly, in condensing the perfectly precise phrase "discontinuous continuity" of trailers into the term "discontinuity editing" (10), Kernan seems to be coining a misnomer. Her discovery of "occasional repositionings of the meanings of shots" hardly justifies a term suggesting a counter-mode of editing, especially when she acknowledges that her examples provide only "fresh validation" (11) for such key continuity undergirdings as the Kuleshov effect. That the editing in the trailer to *You've Got Mail* (1998) transforms Meg Ryan falling onto a bed from a moment of frustration into a swoon is quite interesting, but is this because an alternative mode of editing is being employed or because a familiar mode of editing is being used to create an alternative meaning?

Because Kernan's examples range over seven decades, the scope of her project requires wide-ranging background knowledge of Hollywood and American cultural history, but this knowledge is not always accurate. Kernan's belief that the sequential "replacement" of Wally Berry's image with an even bigger one of Jean Harlow "signified" Harlow's "dominance" over Berry as a star reveals Kernan's ignorance of Academy Award-winner Berry's status within the industry at the time, especially in later-run and smalltown markets. Similarly, the song "All God's Chillun' Got Rhythm" from *A Day at the Races* (1937), on which Kernan builds a lengthy discussion of the trailer's presentation of a collectivized "comic utopia," was not "a familiar African-American spiritual" (90). The thoroughly secular tune was written for the film by Polish-born studio composer Bronislaw Kaper.

However, the weakest aspect of the book is undoubtedly its understanding of industrial factors, which relies largely on a handful of personal interviews and the work of other scholars, particularly Vinzenz Hediger. That the company which in the early 1920s transformed 35mm trailer production into a key element of film promotion—and continued to dominate the field for decades afterwards—was not an actual production company but National Screen Service, an independent provider of distribution services (they ultimately took on the function of distributing to exhibitors all of the studios' printed publicity material), should come as an eye-opening piece of information to most readers. However, it makes no impact on Kernan, for whom acknowledging the role of the distribution and exhibition ends of the industry problematizes her insistent formulation that trailers are "where the film production industry 'talks' to its audience" (26). Even during a discussion of the "metasignification" involved in the matching of trailers to the films they precede, she repeatedly uses the phrase "studios assume" when in fact this decision has long been made by the exhibitor. Even when trailers were produced "in house," few actual filmmakers have ever enjoyed control over their production. Though Kernan's fascinating discussion of *Rope* (1948), along with her footnote on *Psycho* (1960), point to Hitchcock as a striking exception to this rule (see also the director's stunning appearance in the trailer for *Frenzy* [1972], where he enters the film's diegesis to identify the tie wrapped around a corpse's strangled neck as his own, before reclaiming it for his own collar), she passes up the chance to develop in any depth other famous counter-examples such as Kubrick, who is said to have been involved in the production of the trailers to all of his film's from *Spartacus* (1960) on. The book helpfully includes fifty well-chosen frame enlargments, none reproduced in its proper academy aspect ratio. The index is not close to complete.

DAVID PRATT earned his Ph.D. in Film Studies from Emory University and has published on Indian cinema and on the distribution of silent German cinema in America in *Griffithiana, The Velvet Light Trap,* and *Wide Angle*.

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Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker

Edited by David E. James. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005. $74.50 cloth; $27.95 paper. 240 pages.

David James's collection of scholarly essays, anecdotal reminiscences, and subjective responses to Brakhage enhances our understanding of perhaps the film avant-garde's best-known and most prolific artist. In his introduction, James supplies a succinct biography of the filmmaker followed by a summary of the critical reception of his work. He gives particular attention to P. Adams Sitney's extensive treatment of Brakhage in *Visionary Film* (1974); then points out that, beginning in the 1970s, significant shifts in the social, political, and aesthetic preoccupations of a majority of film critics and scholars, as well as many younger avant-garde filmmakers and their audiences, made the aesthetic and ethical values embodied in Brakhage's films seem increasingly irrelevant, if not reactionary. Consequently, the films Brakhage produced during the last three decades of his life did not receive the extensive critical attention they deserved. James makes a special effort, therefore, to include writings that concentrate on films made from the mid-1970s to the time of Brakhage's death in 2003. The pre-1960s films also receive some attention, but such major works of the 1960s as *Dog Star Man* (1961–64), *The Art of Vision* (1961–65), the 8mm *Songs* (1964–69), and *Scenes From Under Childhood* (1967–70) are not treated in any depth. As useful as it is, *Stan Brakhage: Filmmaker* is not as comprehensive as its title might seem to imply.

Hoping, nevertheless, to trace "the historical trajectory of Brakhage's standing in American culture" (16), James goes first to the journal *Film Culture* for short pieces by Parker Tyler, Jonas Mekas, Jerome Hill, and Robert Kelly published between 1958 and 1965. To these he adds a very short memoir–commentary written by the poet Ed Dorn for Brakhage's 1977 book *Film Biographies*, followed by Annette Michelson's essay "Camera Lucida/Camera Obscura," first published in *Artforum* in 1973. Thereafter, all the texts are new: seven substantial, scholarly essays alternating with eight "personal estimations" (16) from two generations of artists. From Brakhage's own generation, there are the composer James Tenney; the multimedia artist Carolee Schneemann; the filmmaker, poet, and long-time advocate for avant-garde film Jonas Mekas; and the filmmakers Chick Strand and Bruce Baillie. From the next generation are filmmakers Willie Valera, Abigail Child, and Phil Solomon. These contributions convey some sense of who the filmmaker was and what role he played in the give-and-take of friendships, collaborations, mutual interests, and multiple influences that animated American avant-garde film in the second half of the twentieth century.

Michelson's essay sets the terms of the debate about Brakhage's practice, emphasizing his individualistic stand against mass culture, his affirmation of "the imaginative consciousness as inherently apolitical" (39), his creation of "the sense of a continuous present" in the flow of images (53), his affinities with American Abstract Expressionist painters, and his aspiration to render on film "a totally unmediated vision, eluding analytical grasp" (54). Michelson's valid claim that Brakhage redefined the possibilities of the medium to as great a degree as Eisenstein is still not widely enough acknowledged outside avant-garde circles. Elsewhere in the book, Brakhage appears in juxtaposition with further artists and writers. Jerome Hill proposes resemblances between Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and Brakhage's first ten *Songs* (which were all that had appeared when *Film Culture* published his essay "Brakhage and Rilke" in 1965). Longer and more fully developed is David James's "Amateurs in an Industry Town: Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol in Los Angeles." Noting that both artists worked in Los Angeles early in their careers, James describes their different experiences: Brakhage with *Flesh of Morning* (1956) and *Nightcats* (1956), which James analyzes insightfully, and Warhol with *Tarzan and Jane, Regained Sort Of* (1963). A rather different juxtaposition is to be found in Craig Dworkin's "Stan Brakhage, Agrimoniac," one of the most thought-provoking essays in the book, which sets Brakhage's quintessentially visual art against the "anti-retinal art" of Marcel Duchamp and representations of "sightless vision" (the expression is Paul Virilo's) created by xerographer Jay Schwartz using malfunctioning photocopiers.

In a truly groundbreaking essay, "Brakhage's Occasions: Figure, Subjectivity, and Avant-Garde Politics," Tyrus Miller constructs a subtle and complex argument that both deepens and revises the common view of Brakhage as an artist working within the Romantic tradition. In the process, he challenges Brakhage's assertions about, as Michelson had put it, the "inherently apolitical" nature of the "imaginative consciousness." For Miller, Brakhage's films offer "a singular interaction of the artist's and the spectator's body with the chemistry of film, the physics of light, the machinery of filmmaking and projection, and the social context of reception" (187). He also challenges the use of expressions like "first-person vision" and "first-person cinema" to characterize Brakhage's films, positing instead a "loss of self" in the interaction of filmmaker, film, and film viewer. The ultimate limit of that "loss of self" is death, and Miller concludes with some observations on the roles death plays in Brakhage's films, from *The Dead* (1960), *Sirius Re-membered* (1959) and *Mothlight* (1963) to *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971) and *The Dark Tower* (1999). Brakhage's work, Miller writes in his conclusion, "stands at the juncture of two phases of radical desubjectification that are not just aesthetic strategies of an individual artist, but epochal characteristics of our biopolitical present: absorption into the immanence of universal life and the assimilation to death" (192–3).

While other authors approach Brakhage in more familiar ways, they nevertheless shed new light on various aspects of Brakhage's work. In "Brakhage's Faustian Psychodrama," P. Adams Sitney explores the autobiographical basis of the four "Faust films" made between 1987 and 1989, and shows how they are "occasions for the filmmaker to return to the scenes

of his aesthetic origins and his artistic growth" (162). In "Brakhage's Poesis," Bruce Elder draws upon poets from Dante to Charles Olson to buttress a carefully argued examination of the tension in Brakhage's aesthetics between solipsism (a potential consequence of "closed eye vision" and "first-person cinema") and "a sense of the self as embedded in, and ultimately identified with a larger matrix"—a "matrix" that reveals (in Elder's summary of the lesson Dante learns from Beatrice in Canto I of *Paradiso*) "a universal instinct [that] penetrates all things, endowing each with a principle that carries it on its individual course through the vast sea of being" (91). Then, with Rilke and Olson as his principal points of reference, Elder examines the role played by "song" in Brakhage's escape from solipsism. Somewhat disconcertingly, he then changes course to conclude by drawing attention to some affinities between Ronald Johnson's poetry cycle *ARK* and Brakhage's films, particularly the first three films of the "Vancouver Island Quartet" (1991–2002).

Those films receive a much closer reading in Paul Arthur's "Becoming Dark With Excess Light: The Vancouver Island Films." Concentrating on the imagery and metaphorical significance of the sea, Arthur provides a sensitive, well-informed analysis that concludes with some useful analogies between the Vancouver Island films and J.M.W. Turner's seascapes. In "The *Roman Numeral* Series," Nicky Hamlyn closely examines a set of films (made in 1979–80) that is particularly resistant to what Michelson called "analytical grasp." But Hamlyn does an excellent job of describing the films' visual effects, analyzing Brakhage's methods of producing them and setting forth the "formal/conceptual issues [that] are at the heart of this series" (128). If Dworkin and Miller demonstrate the value of stepping outside the generally recognized parameters of Brakhage criticism, Hamlyn provides an outstanding example of how much can still be accomplished by working within them.

WILLIAM C. WEES is Editor of the *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* and author of *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film* (University of California Press, 1992).

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Astaire and Rogers

By Edward Gallafent. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. (Originally published by Cameron Books, 2000.) $73.50 cloth; $19.95 paper. 256 pages.

Edward Gallafent's *Astaire and Rogers* carefully chronicles the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers from the 1930s and 1940s, approaching their collaboration as a serial progression of narrative and persona. Previous books such as Arlene Croce's *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (1972) and John Mueller's *Astaire Dancing* (1986) focused on the couple's dance duets. *Astaire and Rogers* builds upon these influential analyses by exploring the often-neglected narrative elements that contextualize the captivating moments of dance. Gallafent thus focuses on "non-musical detail" to unlock the connection from one film in the series to the next (7). By tracing the evolution of plot and its effect on the development of "Fred and Ginger" as a musical couple, Gallafent identifies the impact of this initial partnership on the independent career arcs of each performer. As a result, Gallafent challenges the popular notion that Astaire–Rogers musicals were largely formulaic genre films and produces a rewarding reevaluation of cinema's best-known musical union as a complex construction that extends beyond choreography.

Gallafent undertakes close readings of twenty-eight films (including the separate work of Astaire and Rogers during the period) to demonstrate how the narratives both heighten the audience's desire for a dance partnership and enrich the dancing by connecting one film to the next. Because many of the Astaire–Rogers films were staffed by the same cast and crew members, Gallafent reasonably argues that the films emerged cyclically—utilizing the audience's increasing familiarity with the history of the pair on screen—and in two phases. The first phase involves the discovery or acknowledgement of this pairing as the right professional and/or romantic fit. The second phase relies upon the established union. For example, *Swing Time* (1936) begins the second phase by wasting little time bringing the dance duo together.

To illustrate the progression of the pairing, *Astaire and Rogers* is organized into five chapters. After a very brief but informative introduction, the first two chapters chronicle the beginning and preliminary end of the Astaire–Rogers collaboration. Chapter one begins with *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) and ends with *Follow the Fleet* (1936). This chapter anchors the book's general argument by identifying the primary allure of an Astaire–Rogers collaboration—namely, the complicated balance of a relationship exhibiting class, fantasy, power, profession, and romance through dance. Chapter two outlines the beginning of the end of the Astaire–Rogers union, concluding with Astaire and Rogers's second-to-last film as a couple, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939). The films in this chapter reflect an innovation and retention of narrative characteristics established by the films discussed in the first chapter (52); Gallafent explores the facets of each actor's persona that would be embellished by the on-screen romantic and/or professional partnerships of their solo careers.

Chapters three and four astutely analyze the separate works of Astaire and Rogers that precede their final film together. In chapter three, Gallafent explores Rogers's optimistic and self-reliant persona through her non-musical, romantic roles. The eleven films examined here are arranged thematically to illustrate the character developments across Rogers's many films. Chapter four shows how Astaire's characters largely prioritized professional partnerships—less surprising, given that the six films analyzed are all musicals. Chapter five serves as a sort of conclusion to the book, moving its analysis towards the impending end of the on-screen relationship between the two stars. The chapter's finale is an analysis of Astaire and Rogers's final film together, *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1948).

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Edward Gallafent's *Astaire and Rogers* carefully chronicles the films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers from the 1930s and 1940s, approaching their collaboration as a serial progression of narrative and persona. Previous books such as Arlene Croce's *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (1972) and John Mueller's *Astaire Dancing* (1986) focused on the couple's dance duets. *Astaire and Rogers* builds upon these influential analyses by exploring the often-neglected narrative elements that contextualize the captivating moments of dance. Gallafent thus focuses on "non-musical detail" to unlock the connection from one film in the series to the next (7). By tracing the evolution of plot and its effect on the development of "Fred and Ginger" as a musical couple, Gallafent identifies the impact of this initial partnership on the independent career arcs of each performer. As a result, Gallafent challenges the popular notion that Astaire–Rogers musicals were largely formulaic genre films and produces a rewarding reevaluation of cinema's best-known musical union as a complex construction that extends beyond choreography.

Gallafent undertakes close readings of twenty-eight films (including the separate work of Astaire and Rogers during the period) to demonstrate how the narratives both heighten the audience's desire for a dance partnership and enrich the dancing by connecting one film to the next. Because many of the Astaire–Rogers films were staffed by the same cast and crew members, Gallafent reasonably argues that the films emerged cyclically—utilizing the audience's increasing familiarity with the history of the pair on screen—and in two phases. The first phase involves the discovery or acknowledgement of this pairing as the right professional and/or romantic fit. The second phase relies upon the established union. For example, *Swing Time* (1936) begins the second phase by wasting little time bringing the dance duo together.

To illustrate the progression of the pairing, *Astaire and Rogers* is organized into five chapters. After a very brief but informative introduction, the first two chapters chronicle the beginning and preliminary end of the Astaire–Rogers collaboration. Chapter one begins with *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) and ends with *Follow the Fleet* (1936). This chapter anchors the book's general argument by identifying the primary allure of an Astaire–Rogers collaboration—namely, the complicated balance of a relationship exhibiting class, fantasy, power, profession, and romance through dance. Chapter two outlines the beginning of the end of the Astaire–Rogers union, concluding with Astaire and Rogers's second-to-last film as a couple, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939). The films in this chapter reflect an innovation and retention of narrative characteristics established by the films discussed in the first chapter (52); Gallafent explores the facets of each actor's persona that would be embellished by the on-screen romantic and/or professional partnerships of their solo careers.

Chapters three and four astutely analyze the separate works of Astaire and Rogers that precede their final film together. In chapter three, Gallafent explores Rogers's optimistic and self-reliant persona through her non-musical, romantic roles. The eleven films examined here are arranged thematically to illustrate the character developments across Rogers's many films. Chapter four shows how Astaire's characters largely prioritized professional partnerships—less surprising, given that the six films analyzed are all musicals. Chapter five serves as a sort of conclusion to the book, moving its analysis towards the impending end of the on-screen relationship between the two stars. The chapter's finale is an analysis of Astaire and Rogers's final film together, *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1948).

Beyond its general thesis, *Astaire and Rogers* is most rewarding in its attention to Rogers's role in the Astaire–Rogers pairing (though not at all to the exclusion of Astaire). While Gallafent's analysis is firmly rooted in textual analysis, chapter three historicizes Rogers's career in the 1930s and 1940s, acknowledging its magnitude and profitability. Because scholarship often neglects Rogers in favor of Astaire, this book provides a generous foundation for scholars aiming to reevaluate her impact alongside the more academically revered career of Fred Astaire. Unfortunately, Gallafent's extensively close textual readings in *Astaire and Rogers* may limit the book's reach; this style of analysis may not satiate Astaire–Rogers fans or casual readers despite its unique contribution, wealth of detail, and numerous production stills. Further, the analytical focus may prove challenging to readers less familiar with the many films discussed, despite Gallafent's inclusion of plot summaries. Likewise, the book does not explicitly answer how or why this serial progression might have resonated with musical or general audiences. To his credit, Gallafent is conscious of his study's limitations and he does not claim to produce anything beyond a relational study of Astaire and Rogers's films. That said, the recurring elements of class and gender in Gallafent's analysis would have been enhanced by slightly more attention to the social and historical context of the films. Despite these minor limitations, *Astaire and Rogers* merits consideration by anyone researching Astaire and Rogers, the musical genre, or the progression of classical cinema.

PRISCILLA PEÑA OVALLE is an assistant professor in the English Department at the University of Oregon, where she teaches film studies.
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Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity

Edited by Rachel Moseley. London: BFI Publishing, 2005. $70.00 cloth; $24.95 paper. 198 pages.

One only has to flip through the latest J. Crew catalogue to comprehend the centrality of fashion in relation to a film star's image and, more significantly, audiences' eternal desire to emulate onscreen style. There's the demure white sheath named "Grace," the classic black strapless called "Audrey," and more recently, the richly sheened cotton A-line in a luscious shade of espresso named "Juliette." These appellations may have been selected for their vaguely WASPish connotations, but their resonance (following Richard Dyer's definition) is evocative of their namesake actresses' iconic roles: Grace Kelly's country club cool in *To Catch a Thief* (1954), Audrey Hepburn's continental bearing in *Sabrina* (1954), and Juliette Binoche's voluptuous sensuality in *Chocolat* (1988). As Rachel Moseley rightly proposes at the outset of this volume, in addition to face and voice, it is frequently a star's "specific modes of dress" that serve as "the supreme marker of their identity" (6). Despite this axiom, there is a scarcity of film scholarship centered at the critical juncture of dress and star image. Moseley has collected a pleasurably comprehensible, yet provocative set of essays in an attempt to "redress that balance."

The thirteen chapters by established and emerging scholars build on the strong, if small, body of scholarship already done in the intersecting fields of star studies, costume and dress in film, fashion history and theory, as well as work that addresses the relation between dress and the body, and it is evident that all of the contributors have a formidable cross-disciplinary command of their predecessors' theories. (On this note, the bibliography is a budding fashion/film scholar's dream.) Moseley endeavors to extend the discussion begun by contributors Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog in their seminal 1990 volume *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body* and continued most notably by Jackie Stacey and Sarah Berry. The collection opens up the topic of stars, dress/costume, and identity beyond its usual focus on "white, Hollywood, Eurocentric" (7—and, I would add, typically female-centered) film texts. It is divided into two parts, "Hollywood" and "Asia, Latin America, and Europe." (Arguably, this structure preserves the very paradigm it attempts to rupture.)

The essays are interdisciplinary but grounded in "the socio-cultural and historical moment" (7); so the book is appropriate for a wide readership. But with regards to "fashioning film stars," a number of essays more closely adhere to the collection's primary intention of treating dress "as a signifier specifically linked to the star who wears it" (56). Tamar Jeffers's "*Pillow Talk*'s Repackaging of Doris Day: 'Under all those dirndls . . .'" is one such contribution. Jeffers skillfully illustrates how Day's evening gown in *Pillow Talk* (1959) operates diegetically but, more significantly, she demonstrates how its actual design, color, and fabric, as well as accompanying fur stole, functioned, but perhaps failed, to remarket Day's newly sexual persona. Jeffers's careful reading of the dress as simultaneously prim—on account of its "high slash neckline . . . [which rules] out the possibility of cleavage"—*and* naughty owing to its "virtually backless" (ibid.) top and tightly wrapped derrière, is an exemplary material-culture analysis. As she theorizes, this new package is symbolic beyond the narrative, as its "emphasis on sensuous detail which pleasures her (the softness of wool and fur, the frisson of air on the nude back) . . . signals a mature engagement with sexuality very much at odds with the lasting image of Day as over-ripe virgin" (ibid.). His knowledge of Day's extra-cinematic wardrobe proves the importance of meticulous contextual scholarship.

Although the majority of the essays are estimable, both Ginette Vincendeau's comprehensive "Hot Couture: Brigitte Bardot's Fashion Revolution" and Pam Cook and Claire Hines's multivalent analyses in "'Sean Connery *Is* James Bond': Re-Fashioning British Masculinity in the 1960s" warrant mention. Vincendeau reprises Bardot's physical magnetism, but extends her work to the manner in which the seemingly careless sex kitten artfully arranged her own visage. Incisively recognizing that hair is as much a part of the star package as dress, Vincendeau devotes a full paragraph to Bardot's *choucroute*, "an intentionally incomprehensible"

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style, she writes, that "combined the child-like—a little girl with tangled hair, sometimes even including bows—with the sexual maturity of a pompadour high coiffure" (141). Cook and Hines also expose the artifice behind a star's seemingly innate qualities when they illustrate how Connery's Bond, although in memory thought to be the quintessentially posh Brit, was the result of tutoring the working-class Scot in "style, manners and dress sense" (152). Connery was quite literally *fashioned*; he wore a toupee, plucked his eyebrows, and was encouraged by his director to wear Bond's clothes out in the evening so he would become "accustomed to 007's urbane image" (ibid.). Fashion made the star, so to speak, but then Bond's suave bachelor style provoked an international clamor for Savile Row suits and the star made fashion.

This emulation of star style is an important part of the equation, and in "Dress, Class and Audrey Hepburn: The Significance of the Cinderella Story," Moseley relates the pleasure, power, and pain that young British women experienced in imitating Hepburn's ideal femininity. Her reading of Billy Wilder's extended pause in *Sabrina*, which allowed female spectators to "take in all the details of Sabrina's outfit" after she returns from Paris, is as nuanced a reading as any film scholar could hope for. The strength of this essay, and the book, is based on the obvious delight Moseley and the other authors take in their material. When Moseley comprehends the pleasure of a star's dress, she gets it spot on: "[Dress makes stars] seem special, unreachable and untouchable. At the same time, however, dress and fashion are also a part of the connective tissue of the social, allowing us to make judgments—even sartorial choices—based on our ability to read their articulations in relation to that identity" (6). It is that magic moment when dress and star merge into a seemingly divine being that keeps us glued to the screen, but it is also our desire to emulate them that causes a star-struck young woman to order J. Crew's "Audrey." A significant collection, overall.

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The Films of Orson Welles

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The late Robert Garis's personal engagement with the work of Orson Welles begins with an overview of the director's life and work. Thereafter, Garis looks closely at *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and, together in a single essay, Welles's adaptations of Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952) and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). With beneficial illustration from three dozen stills, the project comes across as selective but not incomplete; it reveals an individual's discretion, at times idiosyncratic but always deeply considered and usually well defended. Occasional admissions that his tastes have changed, and that he finds some Wellesian qualities hard to describe, actually reinforce Garis's authority.

Notwithstanding a few muddling moments—if, for instance, in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, "there are no playful magical devices" (72), how is it exactly that "the film shifts playfully in and out of illusion" (73)—Garis's analysis stays agile and original. Even as he teeters precipitously on the edge of jargon, Garis keeps a humane depth of feeling as his frame of reference. For example, when he describes Kane's pity for his wife Susan, the mediocre singer, as "a marvelously invented and realized movement in the film's dialectic" (57), it's only as a way of leading up to a more straight-talking assertion of the film's "deep wisdom about how people work" (58). Garis gets at an essential truth of Welles through an essential truth of *Citizen Kane*: "we realize that we are experiencing an art in which the artist is licensed to manipulate his devices quite visibly to create his effects, instead of keeping himself hidden behind the work. Such openness is ordinarily avoided on principle by serious artists, but it is of the essence in Welles's work, as it is with all theatrical artists" (43–4). To put it another way, as Garis does later on, "vernacular filmmaking wasn't in his repertory" (97).

A political and historical examination of film noir enriches Garis's discussion of *The Lady from Shanghai*—until, that is, this purposeful digression goes far enough afield to seem like padding for an essay that lacks sufficient material on its chosen subject. That Garis would lack material is highly unlikely but here his priorities seem to get confused. A crucial observation—that "the film is so cryptically and elliptically made that, at many points, it is not secure plot information but only our sense of the habits of the genre that helps us realize what is going on and distinguish the good from the bad" (107)— gets stuffed into a parenthetical aside. Elaboration of this idea seems entirely warranted, especially after so thorough a backgrounder on the noir genre and its context, but Garis focuses instead on another point, albeit an important one: "Welles's stubborn refusal not to cast himself in a role he couldn't pull off" (109).

A wide reader and self-evidently passionate observer not merely of film but also of prose, drama, dance, and music, Garis brings recollections and insights from those other arts to bear on his analysis. Often it's a useful and charming strategy, as when Garis charges that Welles's planned ending of *The Magnificent Ambersons* suits the Booth Tarkington novel from which it was adapted better than Tarkington's own ending; or when he speculates about Welles's inspired, against-type casting of Marlene Dietrich in *Touch of Evil*: "German musician Paul Hindemith was once asked whether he had a clear idea of one of his compositions before he began to compose it and he said that, yes, he did have an idea, but it was like seeing a landscape lit up by lightning—a vivid sense impression that he couldn't specify in the slightest detail, but would recognize when he saw it again, as he did when he began to compose it" (110). It's hardly a stretch to imagine Welles endorsing the delightful rightness of that simile, especially as it applied to the hunch he had about what Dietrich

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could bring to his film. Garis makes a convincing case that *Touch of Evil*'s most artful flourish is the rapport between Dietrich, as the saloon owner Tanya, and Welles, as the brilliant and corrupt detective Hank Quinlan, in a performance Garis deftly describes as "richly detailed in squalid malice" (119).

Garis can be judiciously critical of Welles, taking him to task most particularly for his cuts and textual rearrangements of *Macbeth*, although he finally concedes that at least part of the director's plan was to replace the language of dramaturgy with the language of cinema—and that, when successful, "Welles's reckless cuts sink into unimportance" (146). Today, towering atop countless lists of the best movies ever made, Orson Welles inspires accusations of cultural tyranny seemingly as often as he inspires reverence. As his hulking presence lumbers along through our shared imagination, it helps to get some perspective from Garis's treatment, neither a whitewash nor a hatchet job.

The book belongs to the Cambridge Film Classics series, self-described as revisionist and inclined to "new auteurism," which may account for why Andre Bazin's *Orson Welles: A Critical View* (1978) doesn't turn up in its bibliography. To Garis's credit, the absence isn't a liability; and he does allow himself occasional, if brief, dialogues with the other essential Welles texts by Peter Bogdanovich, Simon Callow, Pauline Kael and David Thomson, but neglects other important works like James Naremore's and Ronald Gottesman's. It is not clear whether Garis's books was fully revised and finished at the time of his death. However, what it most conspicuously lacks is any discussion whatsoever of the highly publicized reworking of *Touch of Evil* by editor Walter Murch, according to Welles's infamous fifty-eight-page memo, in 1998. If his keen examination of studio meddling with *The Magnificent Ambersons* is any indication, a Garis response to the *Touch of Evil* memo and the revision it prompted would have been valuable and edifying.

JONATHAN KIEFER writes about film for the *Sacramento News and Review* and *Maisonneuve* magazine.

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THEORIES AND TOPICS

Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations

Edited by Joseph D. Anderson and Barbara Fisher Anderson. Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2005. $65.00 cloth. 336 pages.

Moving-image theory is not and cannot be a science. To answer certain questions, however, the film theorist must at least consider the findings of the human and natural sciences. How do soundtracks specify the physical properties of imagined objects in the film's fictional world? What techniques do animators use to create realistic motion in computer-generated imagery and how do those techniques fit with the human tendency to seek out visual information in an environment? How do both moving and still images embody information for the viewer and lead to the imagination of other worlds?

Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations asks these sorts of questions. The original essays that comprise the book span a wide range of topics, but share (as did Anderson's 1996 book *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*) commitment to and promotion of ecological psychology, a particular kind of evolutionary psychology, heavily indebted to the work of James J. Gibson. Gibson posits an active relationship between persons and their environment, by which they actively seek out *affordances*—characteristics of the environment that bear directly on human needs and the requirement for action. The essays of *Moving Image Theory* attempt to apply Gibson's ideas in accounts of the ways in which viewers perceive, make sense of, and respond to various elements of the moving-image media.

The foreword by David Bordwell argues that movies are designed to mesh with human cognitive and perceptual capabilities. Bordwell bemoans the current state of film theory, which, he argues, assumes an extreme culturalist framework that dismisses out of hand the claims for more or less universal characteristics of perception and cognition, what Bordwell calls "contingent universals" (x). Given the importance of the issues at stake and the need to locate ecological theory among the thicket of conflicting film theories, I wish that the editors of *Moving Image Theory* had provided a more comprehensive introduction to the volume (there are also brief introductions to each of the seven parts). Joseph Anderson's introduction clearly describes the basic tenets of ecological psychology, but it does not explore, for example, the ways in which ecological film theory complements or contradicts the somewhat different approaches of Noël Carroll or Murray Smith; nor does it delineate possible areas of agreement between the naturalist and the culturalist. Many of the authors are empirical psychologists who engage in scientific experimentation. In presenting such work as moving-image theory, are Anderson and Anderson arguing that film theorists should perform empirical experiments or merely that film theorists should understand and employ the results of such empirical work in other disciplines? A more extensive introduction might have answered such questions and so broadened the book's appeal.

The book is divided into seven parts, each with two essays. The topics range from the information available in motion pictures, to information in facial expression, to the coupling of perception and emotion, to the appeals of reality-based media. It is best to see *Moving Image Theory* not as comprehensive, but rather as a series of case studies that illustrate the ecological approach to moving-image theory. More than half of the authors are psychologists, the remainder primarily film and media scholars (with a few other disciplines represented). The best essays are very good indeed. Charles Eidsvik, in his "Background Tracks in Recent Cinema," notes that sound studies is one of the few areas in

could bring to his film. Garis makes a convincing case that *Touch of Evil*'s most artful flourish is the rapport between Dietrich, as the saloon owner Tanya, and Welles, as the brilliant and corrupt detective Hank Quinlan, in a performance Garis deftly describes as "richly detailed in squalid malice" (119).

Garis can be judiciously critical of Welles, taking him to task most particularly for his cuts and textual rearrangements of *Macbeth*, although he finally concedes that at least part of the director's plan was to replace the language of dramaturgy with the language of cinema—and that, when successful, "Welles's reckless cuts sink into unimportance" (146). Today, towering atop countless lists of the best movies ever made, Orson Welles inspires accusations of cultural tyranny seemingly as often as he inspires reverence. As his hulking presence lumbers along through our shared imagination, it helps to get some perspective from Garis's treatment, neither a whitewash nor a hatchet job.

The book belongs to the Cambridge Film Classics series, self-described as revisionist and inclined to "new auteurism," which may account for why Andre Bazin's *Orson Welles: A Critical View* (1978) doesn't turn up in its bibliography. To Garis's credit, the absence isn't a liability; and he does allow himself occasional, if brief, dialogues with the other essential Welles texts by Peter Bogdanovich, Simon Callow, Pauline Kael and David Thomson, but neglects other important works like James Naremore's and Ronald Gottesman's. It is not clear whether Garis's books was fully revised and finished at the time of his death. However, what it most conspicuously lacks is any discussion whatsoever of the highly publicized reworking of *Touch of Evil* by editor Walter Murch, according to Welles's infamous fifty-eight-page memo, in 1998. If his keen examination of studio meddling with *The Magnificent Ambersons* is any indication, a Garis response to the *Touch of Evil* memo and the revision it prompted would have been valuable and edifying.

JONATHAN KIEFER writes about film for the *Sacramento News and Review* and *Maisonneuve* magazine.

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THEORIES AND TOPICS

Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations

Edited by Joseph D. Anderson and Barbara Fisher Anderson. Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2005. $65.00 cloth. 336 pages.

Moving-image theory is not and cannot be a science. To answer certain questions, however, the film theorist must at least consider the findings of the human and natural sciences. How do soundtracks specify the physical properties of imagined objects in the film's fictional world? What techniques do animators use to create realistic motion in computer-generated imagery and how do those techniques fit with the human tendency to seek out visual information in an environment? How do both moving and still images embody information for the viewer and lead to the imagination of other worlds?

Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations asks these sorts of questions. The original essays that comprise the book span a wide range of topics, but share (as did Anderson's 1996 book *The Reality of Illusion: An Ecological Approach to Cognitive Film Theory*) commitment to and promotion of ecological psychology, a particular kind of evolutionary psychology, heavily indebted to the work of James J. Gibson. Gibson posits an active relationship between persons and their environment, by which they actively seek out *affordances*—characteristics of the environment that bear directly on human needs and the requirement for action. The essays of *Moving Image Theory* attempt to apply Gibson's ideas in accounts of the ways in which viewers perceive, make sense of, and respond to various elements of the moving-image media.

The foreword by David Bordwell argues that movies are designed to mesh with human cognitive and perceptual capabilities. Bordwell bemoans the current state of film theory, which, he argues, assumes an extreme culturalist framework that dismisses out of hand the claims for more or less universal characteristics of perception and cognition, what Bordwell calls "contingent universals" (x). Given the importance of the issues at stake and the need to locate ecological theory among the thicket of conflicting film theories, I wish that the editors of *Moving Image Theory* had provided a more comprehensive introduction to the volume (there are also brief introductions to each of the seven parts). Joseph Anderson's introduction clearly describes the basic tenets of ecological psychology, but it does not explore, for example, the ways in which ecological film theory complements or contradicts the somewhat different approaches of Noël Carroll or Murray Smith; nor does it delineate possible areas of agreement between the naturalist and the culturalist. Many of the authors are empirical psychologists who engage in scientific experimentation. In presenting such work as moving-image theory, are Anderson and Anderson arguing that film theorists should perform empirical experiments or merely that film theorists should understand and employ the results of such empirical work in other disciplines? A more extensive introduction might have answered such questions and so broadened the book's appeal.

The book is divided into seven parts, each with two essays. The topics range from the information available in motion pictures, to information in facial expression, to the coupling of perception and emotion, to the appeals of reality-based media. It is best to see *Moving Image Theory* not as comprehensive, but rather as a series of case studies that illustrate the ecological approach to moving-image theory. More than half of the authors are psychologists, the remainder primarily film and media scholars (with a few other disciplines represented). The best essays are very good indeed. Charles Eidsvik, in his "Background Tracks in Recent Cinema," notes that sound studies is one of the few areas in

which moving-image scholars and artists read and respect each others' work. The essay is an excellent overview of the technology and practices of the recording, construction, and playback of background tracks and a theory of their functions in motion pictures. William Evans, in "Reality Programming: Evolutionary Models of Film and Television Viewership," offers a fascinating account of the adaptive appeal of reality programming in the media, arguing that throughout human history, humans have survived in part by carefully surveilling their environment, including their social environment. Contemporary moving-image media satisfy a primitive need for surveillance. As Evans argues, just as the human craving for sweets and fat has played an adaptive role in human history but today may lead to obesity, this desire to survey the environment through the media accounts for the omnipresence of the media and has become pathological in contemporary culture.

Jessica Hodgins, in "Creating Realistic Motion," offers a very good overview of the difficulties animators face in the simulation of realistic motion. She carefully describes the processes involved, including keyframing, motion capture, and simulation, all in relation to the human perceptual system. James E. Cutting's excellent "Perceiving Scenes in Film and the World" describes the relationship between human perceptual capacities and moving-image editing. Cutting notes that the conventions of filmmaking (such as the 180-degree rule) do not constitute a grammar of film, as some claim. The violation of grammatical rules in language renders sentences incomprehensible or ambiguous. The same does not apply in film and so Cutting contends that filmmaking conventions are less like grammar than like conversational axioms.

Dolf Zillman's "Cinematic Creation of Emotion" is full of interesting findings and insights culled from years of research into the psychology of media. For example, his notion of "excitation transfer" holds that "residual excitation from essentially any emotional reaction is capable of intensifying any other emotional reaction" (166). Yet like many empirical researchers, Zillman believes that everything must be quantified and in this search for certainty is prone to conceiving of spectator responses in terms of formulas rather than general tendencies. In his intriguing but problematic "Documentaries' Particular Appeals," Dirk Eitzen expands on his argument that the correct question to ask is not "what" but "when" is a documentary. Documentaries, Eitzen claims, elicit three "emotions" that together constitute their particular appeal: a disposition to intervene, an inclination to trust the discourse, and a special sense of privilege or belonging (in which documentary spectatorship functions as a kind of cultural capital). Eitzen claims that he is developing a pragmatics of documentary, but his approach pays little heed to the social functions of documentaries or to conventions of reception, as a pragmatics would (for example, Roger Odin's semio-pragmatic approach or Noël Carroll's notion of "indexing"). Therefore his approach is more a reception theory of documentary grounded in the kind of feelings instilled by the text.

Moving Image Theory makes a significant contribution to cognitive film theory. Yet a few criticisms and questions are in order. At least one chapter of the book is in need of serious copy-editing. A few others—especially Robert E. Shaw and William H. Mace's "The Value of Oriented Geometry for Ecological Psychology and Moving Image Art" and Claudio Carello, Jeffrey B. Wagman, and Michael T. Turvey's "Acoustic Specifications of Object Properties"—are too complex for all but specialists in the theory of ecological perception. Conversely, some of the contributing psychologists do not, frankly, seem to know much about the moving-image media. The most egregious example of this is "Movies and Metaphors," by John M. Kennedy and Dan L. Chiappe, which largely refers to linguistic rather than audio-visual metaphors to illustrate its points.

CARL PLANTINGA is a professor of film studies at Calvin College. He is currently finishing a book entitled *Moved and Affected: American Film and the Spectator's Experience*.

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Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film

By Susan McCabe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. $75.00 cloth. 194 pages.

Susan McCabe approaches European and American modernism in general and writers Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, H.D., and Marianne Moore in particular with two main aims. The first is to show how their filmgoing influenced their writing so thoroughly that constant parallels can be drawn between cinematic techniques (such as montage) and their practice. The second is to argue that the underlying psychological experience of modernist literature and film is related to a perceived hysterical body, a body eroticized and fractured and denoted as female (whether contextualized as a woman or a man). McCabe relates this argument to World War I, taking up the often-cited theory that hysteria was the underground zeitgeist of the European and American reaction to the devastations of that war. Less overtly but perhaps most interestingly, McCabe also explores the theme of "sexual indeterminacy" or "third sex" (20)—a homosexuality that began to identify itself—as a burgeoning, disturbing, and queer galvanizer of modernism.

She rigorously builds her argument, often discussing a writer's interest in a specific film—such as H.D's love of G.W. Pabst's *Joyless Street* (1924) or Moore's attraction to J. Sibley Watson's *Lot in Sodom* (1933)—or correlating a writer's style with some cinematic element, as with her comparison between themes in Stein and Chaplin or Williams and Germaine Dulac's surreal *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1927). However, my assessment is that her analysis of "cinematic modernism" covers too much material within too narrow a scope. McCabe aims to "reorient literary studies" (17) and to argue that film was "associated with the cellular, mutable and hystericized body" which then "offered an important means

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for many modernists to picture, project, and reconstruct their fragmented bodies in," as Linda Williams had labeled it, "a 'drama of dismemberment and reintegration'" (13). Stein, Moore, and H.D. "undermin[e]," according to McCabe, the "conventional forms of female embodiment" (94) by composing their own versions of a sexualized cohesion of the "fragmented" body, while Williams "masochistically" dissects his male "gaze" through tropes that mirror surrealist films (94). They each have made this intention "legible" in their writings by literary parallels to "camerawork and montage" (226). To support her argument, McCabe defines modernism through the ideas of current academic thinkers and the usual modernist "fathers": Freud, Benjamin, Baudelaire. She does not counter or expand on their interpretations; instead, she uses them as modernist signposts. But these perimeters restrict McCabe's more original queer angle. Had she further stressed her take on modernism's underworld of "shifting possibilities, ambiguities and in-between positions of gender and sexual embodiment," which she feels are the key elements of the "experiment" (226) of her four modernists, her book would have contributed uniquely to the comparative study of literature and film.

McCabe is at her best when she makes connections between the three female writers, especially exploring the way they triumph artistically over the culturally scapegoated female body. For example, she explores Stein's and H.D.'s lesbianism with respect to their use of ellipsis, word play, and repetition and their film work; and she discusses Moore's sexuality, which was maligned as being repressed, in an analysis of her line breaks and alliterations. But when McCabe dwells on simple word-versus-film frame parallels, she makes occasional oversweeping statements that dilute her thesis, as when she attributes to film a cataclysmic effect on popular consciousness and its sense of time: "The body of the modernist poem gained new angles, line-breaks, asymmetries and synapses, shifting within and through the very technologies that disoriented the relationship of the human body, no longer framed or harmonized by Cartesian perspective, to time and space. More particularly, film's ability to repeat a series of movements, separated within time, effectively displaced any illusion of wholeness as either an aesthetic or bodily principle" (18). Such a statement is too broad. Film cannot be viewed as a *fait accompli* that orchestrated such a uniform response, let alone a complete loss of Cartesian certainties.

DRAKE STUTESMAN is the editor of *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* and author of *Snake* (Reaktion Books), a cultural history of snakes. Her Ph.D. is on the writing of Susan Howe.

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The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man: An Essay in Sociological Anthropology

By Edgar Morin. Translated by Lorraine Mortimer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. $19.95 paper. 336 pages.

"The strange obviousness of the everyday. The first mystery of the cinema is in this obviousness. What is astonishing is that it does not astonish us"(3)—for Edgar Morin, writing in France in 1956, cinema reclaims the astonishment of the everyday against the background of capitalism's increasing banalization of the quotidian. Addressing the fascination of the audience for the first cinematic images, Morin points out, "it was not for the real but for the projected image of the real that the people flocked to the doors of the Salon Indien" (14). And it is in this enchantment with the projected image of the real that Morin seeks the very essence of cinema. In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1945), André Bazin locates "a basic psychological need" to preserve life from the irreversible flow of time that drives artistic production, from the first prehistoric clay figures to the photograph. Specifically addressing how this myth of immortality persists in our relationship to photography, Morin adduces various social practices that fetishize the image, turning it into "an object of possession or bewitchment" (20). Our everyday caresses of a picture of a loved one is hypostasized in the occult practices in which the photograph becomes a substitute for the person, a real presence, which we can possess and in turn be possessed by. But it is important to note that the doubling effect is not a property of the photograph itself but that of the human mind, "an imaginary process of projection" (24). Morin expands Bazin's emphasis on the psychological effect and existential underpinnings of photography's automatic character, a character that can seem to transcend the contingency of reality, finally overcoming death, promising immortality. Consequently, Morin identifies this imaginary projection upon the photographic image as essentially an assertion of the sovereignty of human subjectivity. In addressing the desire for immortality, photography and cinema are akin to religion and to ideas of the fantasmatic.

Noteworthy in Morin's account is the necessary trajectory he sees in the transition from photograph to cinematograph to cinema (which Morin clearly differentiates from the cinematograph) and, eventually, to the dominance of fiction within cinema—a trajectory that intensifies the element of magic, dream, or fantasy in response to the ever-increasing alienation and reification of human existence. If the photograph is encumbered by its materiality to become more and more a fetishized object of private consumption, the cinematograph liberates the double by projecting the image upon the screen as collective spectacle. Furthermore, the darkness of the hall lulls us into a state of hallucinatory daydreaming. Beyond Bazin, Morin underscores the fantastical element of the double in cinematic realism, consequently identifying the essence of cinema with the projected image rather than the photograph. For Morin, the myth of immortality is first expressed in the "archaic magic" (36) of shadows within prehistoric caves (rather than Bazin's mummies of clay).

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The myth is amplified in dreams of "total cinema," imaginings of dissolving the screen and projecting the image into the sky, where ghosts are not only everywhere, but brought back to life as indistinguishable from us, a complete merging of humans and their doubles. This metamorphosis of life into its double is identified as the impulse behind the shift from cinematograph to cinema, from projected image to image transformed under the flux of the dream. According to Morin, the catalytic figure is Georges Méliès—perhaps an unexpected affirmation from a writer best known for his collaboration with Jean Rouch in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), the prototypical cinéma-vérité documentary. Significantly, Morin claims Méliès as the father of cinema not only because of his passion for magical effects, but because his first and essential effect is superimposition. Morin asserts that superimposition is the underlying basis for all cinematic language including that of montage. It initiates a metamorphosis of time and space, offering a fluid universe in which the spectator occupies a ubiquitous position, one that is significantly akin to that of the dream. Turning away from the Bazinian aesthetic, Morin situates the natural state of cinema between dream and reality, the realm of the hypnagogic image, foreseeing later film theories (especially those influenced by psychoanalysis), as well as an entire direction in post-World War II American avant-garde filmmaking, epitomized in the work of Stan Brakhage.

In Morin's account, the two poles of cinematic magic, the double and metamorphosis, primarily depend upon two aspects of our affective participation with the cinema, possession and bewitchment: the projection of oneself into the world and the absorption of the world into oneself. Such emphasis on the necessity of spectatorial participation and cinema's kinship with the dream finds itself at the center of theorizations of the cinematic apparatus such as that of Jean-Louis Baudry. In Baudry's two highly influential essays, "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus" (1970) and "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema" (1975), cinematic spectatorship is addressed in a rigorous psychoanalytic framework inflected by the Marxism of Louis Althusser. Film's "impression of reality," which is attributed not to its verisimilitude but to an experience created in the spectator, raises the question of the spectator's desire for such misrecognition, the pleasure of interpellation. Through its ability to present representations as perceptions, the specific pleasure offered by cinema repeats a desire to return to a state of original plentitude presented in our fantasies. For Baudry, the spectator's fantasy of mastery is an ideological effect determined by the dominant ideology; hence, the pleasures of cinema are suspect, finally to be denied. Morin, however, recognizes spectatorial fantasy as an affirmation of the myth of immortality, the desire to aver the sovereignty of the human subject, the very existence of "man."

Cinema's fantastical effects are, in Morin's account, to be embraced rather than disavowed. The significance of the cinema, Morin argues, is that it completely externalizes the imaginary processes. Cinema gives us immediate access to the "internal theater of the mind: dreams, imaginings, representations: *this little cinema that we have in our head*" (203). The imaginary, for Morin, is the key aspect of the human mind and its negotiation with the world. By reclaiming and reinforcing the imaginary, cinema establishes our very being. Consequently, Morin's writings and his emphasis on the practical role of the imaginary is very much aligned with the politics of his moment in which one was argued to be not only alienated from labor but also from life itself. This was the moment when the critique of capitalism was insistently extended beyond the economic sphere and Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1920) was enthusiastically reread for the proposal that the commodity fetish is the universal category of the social being.

For Morin, to question the cinema is "to envisage it in its human totality" to investigate the needs of the practical and the imaginary. And if the imaginary aspect of cinema is increasingly to be found in fictional narrative, he argues, "it is perhaps in the documentaries that the cinema utilizes its gifts to the maximum and manifests its most profound 'magical' powers" (75). Thus, in foregrounding the structuring role of fantasy in our engagement with reality, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man* not only brings to the fore what is at stake in film theory's shift away from Bazin's claim for cinematic realism, but also allows for a historiography of cinema which aligns the theories and practices of the narrative paradigm with that of its alternatives, the nonfictional and the avant-garde film.

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BOOK NOTES

Contributors to Book Notes: **Shmuel Ben-Gad** is a librarian at George Washington University and a bibliographer for Robert-Bresson.com (www.mastersofcinema.org/bresson). **Bernard F. Dick** is the author of a forthcoming biography of Rosalind Russell, *Forever Mame*. **Rodney Hill** is a Marion L. Brittain Fellow in Georgia Tech's School of Literature, Communication, and Culture. **Kalynn Huffman Brower** has been teaching screenwriting at Indiana University-Bloomington for ten years.

Van Sijll, Jennifer, *Cinematic Storytelling: The 100 Most Powerful Film Conventions Every Filmmaker Must Know*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2005. $24.95 paper. 257 pages. *Cinematic Storytelling* is a beautiful encyclopedia of film language. Van Sijll names and decodes one hundred technical elements used by master filmmakers to engage audiences on a psychological and emotional level. She uses specific examples from classics, such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Touch of Evil* (1958), as well as examples from contemporary films, such as *The Piano* (1993) and *Adaptation* (2002).

The myth is amplified in dreams of "total cinema," imaginings of dissolving the screen and projecting the image into the sky, where ghosts are not only everywhere, but brought back to life as indistinguishable from us, a complete merging of humans and their doubles. This metamorphosis of life into its double is identified as the impulse behind the shift from cinematograph to cinema, from projected image to image transformed under the flux of the dream. According to Morin, the catalytic figure is Georges Méliès—perhaps an unexpected affirmation from a writer best known for his collaboration with Jean Rouch in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), the prototypical cinéma-vérité documentary. Significantly, Morin claims Méliès as the father of cinema not only because of his passion for magical effects, but because his first and essential effect is superimposition. Morin asserts that superimposition is the underlying basis for all cinematic language including that of montage. It initiates a metamorphosis of time and space, offering a fluid universe in which the spectator occupies a ubiquitous position, one that is significantly akin to that of the dream. Turning away from the Bazinian aesthetic, Morin situates the natural state of cinema between dream and reality, the realm of the hypnagogic image, foreseeing later film theories (especially those influenced by psychoanalysis), as well as an entire direction in post-World War II American avant-garde filmmaking, epitomized in the work of Stan Brakhage.

In Morin's account, the two poles of cinematic magic, the double and metamorphosis, primarily depend upon two aspects of our affective participation with the cinema, possession and bewitchment: the projection of oneself into the world and the absorption of the world into oneself. Such emphasis on the necessity of spectatorial participation and cinema's kinship with the dream finds itself at the center of theorizations of the cinematic apparatus such as that of Jean-Louis Baudry. In Baudry's two highly influential essays, "The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus" (1970) and "The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema" (1975), cinematic spectatorship is addressed in a rigorous psychoanalytic framework inflected by the Marxism of Louis Althusser. Film's "impression of reality," which is attributed not to its verisimilitude but to an experience created in the spectator, raises the question of the spectator's desire for such misrecognition, the pleasure of interpellation. Through its ability to present representations as perceptions, the specific pleasure offered by cinema repeats a desire to return to a state of original plentitude presented in our fantasies. For Baudry, the spectator's fantasy of mastery is an ideological effect determined by the dominant ideology; hence, the pleasures of cinema are suspect, finally to be denied. Morin, however, recognizes spectatorial fantasy as an affirmation of the myth of immortality, the desire to aver the sovereignty of the human subject, the very existence of "man."

Cinema's fantastical effects are, in Morin's account, to be embraced rather than disavowed. The significance of the cinema, Morin argues, is that it completely externalizes the imaginary processes. Cinema gives us immediate access to the "internal theater of the mind: dreams, imaginings, representations: *this little cinema that we have in our head*" (203). The imaginary, for Morin, is the key aspect of the human mind and its negotiation with the world. By reclaiming and reinforcing the imaginary, cinema establishes our very being. Consequently, Morin's writings and his emphasis on the practical role of the imaginary is very much aligned with the politics of his moment in which one was argued to be not only alienated from labor but also from life itself. This was the moment when the critique of capitalism was insistently extended beyond the economic sphere and Georg Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* (1920) was enthusiastically reread for the proposal that the commodity fetish is the universal category of the social being.

For Morin, to question the cinema is "to envisage it in its human totality" to investigate the needs of the practical and the imaginary. And if the imaginary aspect of cinema is increasingly to be found in fictional narrative, he argues, "it is perhaps in the documentaries that the cinema utilizes its gifts to the maximum and manifests its most profound 'magical' powers" (75). Thus, in foregrounding the structuring role of fantasy in our engagement with reality, *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man* not only brings to the fore what is at stake in film theory's shift away from Bazin's claim for cinematic realism, but also allows for a historiography of cinema which aligns the theories and practices of the narrative paradigm with that of its alternatives, the nonfictional and the avant-garde film.

SOYOUNG YOON is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at Stanford University, where she is writing her dissertation, *Filming "Das Kapital": Critiques of Ideology and Pedagogies of Pleasure in Post-War American and European Avant-garde Cinema*.
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Eyman's Mayer is patriarchal, manipulative, rapacious, and at times pathetic, especially in his quest for female companionship. But he is often unintentionally funny. When actress Irene Hervey asked Mayer for a raise, he brought her into his bathroom and introduced her to his mouthwash, Hollywood's best, which he asked her to sample. Mayer then told her to go out and buy some. Hervey did not get her raise, but at least she learned something about oral hygiene.

BERNARD F. DICK

Curran, Beth Kathryn, *Touching God: The Novels of Georges Bernanos in the Films of Robert Bresson*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. $58.95 cloth. 124 pages. This careful, precise study of the films *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *Mouchette* (1967) and the novels upon which they are based analyzes the style and themes of each. The focus on adaptations of two works by the same author, but made many years apart, results in much interesting food for thought on the variety of methods of adaptation used by Bresson.

In her analysis of the film *Diary of a Country Priest*, the author is especially good on the aural and written narrative forms and their relationship. She also points out the difference in feel between the novel and the film in that the former is composed of past events while the film takes place completely in the present. Curran also shows that the film focuses on the spiritual development of the priest, eschewing other, more external, matters in the novel.

Curran's discussion of the film *Mouchette* is equally fruitful, bringing out its greater emphasis upon violence than the novel, how the film makes Mouchette's relationship with her rapist, Arsène, even more brutal, and the elimination of both the novel's depiction of Mouchette's thoughts and its omniscient commentary. Perhaps most importantly, she shows that the film indicates the unrealized possibilities for happiness of the miserable village girl.

Comparisons of the two films are also made. While both are in Bresson's mature style, there are differences, the lack of first-person narration in *Mouchette* being the most obvious. Related to this is that language plays much less of a role in *Mouchette*. Yet another difference noted, but perhaps not emphasized quite enough, is that *Diary of a Country Priest* has extensive background music while *Mouchette* has only Monteverdi's *Magnificat* play at the beginning and the end. This is the main reason, I think, why Bresson's brilliant use of natural sounds (which the book discusses very well in regard to both films) seems more prominent in *Mouchette*. However, Curran does not mention that while *Diary of a Country Priest* has at least a couple of striking shots, by the time of *Mouchette*, Bresson eschewed such spectacle entirely.

In the concluding chapter, the author argues that, after *Mouchette*, there is a turn to pessimism in Bresson's films (though she quite properly qualifies this in the final paragraph). Curran does this by comparing the suicide in *Mouchette* (where the *Magnificat* implies salvation) with those in *Une femme douce* (1969), and *The Devil Probably* (1977). However, if analysis is extended beyond suicide, there is counter-evidence. In an earlier film, *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), while salvation is implied in the donkey protagonist's death, there is no hint of this in the disappearance of the central human character, Marie. Also, it seems to me that in Bresson's final, most refined, and very tough film, *L'Argent* (1983), the ending is dark and not at all uplifting but also not utterly hopeless. But even when one can argue with the book, it is a book worth arguing with. It is a rewarding study, especially of Bressonian adaptation.

SHMUEL BEN-GAD

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Eyman structures his narrative according to the rise-and-fall tradition, as if Mayer's life were a classical tragedy, which in many ways it was. Like Charles Foster Kane, Louis B. Mayer personified the American Dream—an ordinary man who through a combination of luck, perseverance, and vision, founded an empire. He knew loss: his mother's death from which he never recovered; and the growing estrangement between himself and his production chief, Irving Thalberg, the surrogate son who became a mirror image, embodying many of Mayer's worst features, including a love of power and an obsession with money. Understandably, Mayer mused on route to Thalberg's funeral in 1936, "Isn't God good to me?"

Eventually, Mayer's day came in 1951 when he was replaced by Dore Schary, about whom Eyman has little good to say. But by then, MGM's glory days were over, and Mayer had six more years of life, dying of leukemia in 1957.

Eyman's Mayer is patriarchal, manipulative, rapacious, and at times pathetic, especially in his quest for female companionship. But he is often unintentionally funny. When actress Irene Hervey asked Mayer for a raise, he brought her into his bathroom and introduced her to his mouthwash, Hollywood's best, which he asked her to sample. Mayer then told her to go out and buy some. Hervey did not get her raise, but at least she learned something about oral hygiene.

BERNARD F. DICK

Curran, Beth Kathryn, *Touching God: The Novels of Georges Bernanos in the Films of Robert Bresson*. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. $58.95 cloth. 124 pages. This careful, precise study of the films *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *Mouchette* (1967) and the novels upon which they are based analyzes the style and themes of each. The focus on adaptations of two works by the same author, but made many years apart, results in much interesting food for thought on the variety of methods of adaptation used by Bresson.

In her analysis of the film *Diary of a Country Priest*, the author is especially good on the aural and written narrative forms and their relationship. She also points out the difference in feel between the novel and the film in that the former is composed of past events while the film takes place completely in the present. Curran also shows that the film focuses on the spiritual development of the priest, eschewing other, more external, matters in the novel.

Curran's discussion of the film *Mouchette* is equally fruitful, bringing out its greater emphasis upon violence than the novel, how the film makes Mouchette's relationship with her rapist, Arsène, even more brutal, and the elimination of both the novel's depiction of Mouchette's thoughts and its omniscient commentary. Perhaps most importantly, she shows that the film indicates the unrealized possibilities for happiness of the miserable village girl.

Comparisons of the two films are also made. While both are in Bresson's mature style, there are differences, the lack of first-person narration in *Mouchette* being the most obvious. Related to this is that language plays much less of a role in *Mouchette*. Yet another difference noted, but perhaps not emphasized quite enough, is that *Diary of a Country Priest* has extensive background music while *Mouchette* has only Monteverdi's *Magnificat* play at the beginning and the end. This is the main reason, I think, why Bresson's brilliant use of natural sounds (which the book discusses very well in regard to both films) seems more prominent in *Mouchette*. However, Curran does not mention that while *Diary of a Country Priest* has at least a couple of striking shots, by the time of *Mouchette*, Bresson eschewed such spectacle entirely.

In the concluding chapter, the author argues that, after *Mouchette*, there is a turn to pessimism in Bresson's films (though she quite properly qualifies this in the final paragraph). Curran does this by comparing the suicide in *Mouchette* (where the *Magnificat* implies salvation) with those in *Une femme douce* (1969), and *The Devil Probably* (1977). However, if analysis is extended beyond suicide, there is counter-evidence. In an earlier film, *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), while salvation is implied in the donkey protagonist's death, there is no hint of this in the disappearance of the central human character, Marie. Also, it seems to me that in Bresson's final, most refined, and very tough film, *L'Argent* (1983), the ending is dark and not at all uplifting but also not utterly hopeless. But even when one can argue with the book, it is a book worth arguing with. It is a rewarding study, especially of Bressonian adaptation.

SHMUEL BEN-GAD